

The Tempests Created This Tide by AabH

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

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Summary:

My contribution to MerMay.

Will was just trying to keep his head low and his bills paid. The job at the Research Center for Ocean Life was easy, quiet, and it kept food in his belly. Everything was going well until he saw something in the Deep Sea enclosures he couldn't explain.

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His sneakers slid across the soap, making him windmill his arms and for a moment, the safety training video he'd watched a few weeks prior played on a loop in his head, scolding him for not wearing no-slip shoes.

"No. Nope. No fucking way," he panted through chattering teeth as he found his footing and leaned his back against the door.

He kept his eyes locked on the enclosure, waiting for the light to show up again or for his mind to come up with a better explanation than there was a fucking alien in a tank less than a hundred feet away from him. He waited almost half an hour before he found his

nerve and crept back to retrieve the mop. He didn't bother to clean the glass, justifying it with the lack of time he had left in his shift rather than the queasy feeling in his stomach and uncomfortable, primal fear of being confronted with something he had no logical explanation for.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

My contribution to MerMay. Last year I did a story with Will as a Merfolk, so this year it's Mike's turn. Honestly, I had about 14k already typed and still unfinished, so I decided to break it into chapters since I doubted anyone wanted to read 20k+ in one sitting. I'm thinking it will be around three or four when it's completed.

CW: Language, mild horror elements, and if you're uneasy with deep, black water, you might want to skip this story all together.

Tags and warnings will be added as they're needed.

Will really, *really* hated crowds, and had for as long as he could remember. It made almost everything in his life difficult; from school to maintaining relationships with people in both his personal and professional life. Even family gatherings could be difficult and more often than not, he found himself hiding out in his old bedroom rather than socialize with relatives who asked invasive questions and tried to puzzle out exactly what was wrong with him based on his responses.

When he'd been offered the job as the nightly custodian at the Research Center for Ocean Life, he'd jumped at the chance. At least he wouldn't have to deal with anyone but himself and could use it as an excuse for why he wasn't available most days (he needed sleep) or nights (he had to work). He could show up, clock in, put on his headphones, and just work his shift in peace, without customers or coworkers to bother him. Sometimes he'd listen to podcasts or audio books, but mostly it was just music. It didn't even have to have lyrics, it just had to be soothing and offer him some way to zone out and pass the time. He didn't even mind the NDAs he had to sign, or the waivers when he'd been hired. He was just happy to have a job at all that didn't involve him in an apron taking orders from people who weren't going to tip him anyway.

The worst part of the whole ordeal was his training, and that was only because the Deep Sea quadrant of the facility was so dark and full of swinging, suspended catwalks over perilously deep and unlit tanks that Will had to battle vertigo the entire time his trainer worked with him.

“Pay attention to where you’re going up here, you got it? Most of the stuff in here is harmless, but if you fall in, you better be able to pull yourself out cause no one will see ya. The cameras,” he said, indicating one of the blinking red lights in a corner, “pick up night vision alright, but you fall in the middle of a tank it won’t see you through the water.”

“I’m a pretty good swimmer,” Will said, swallowing down a wave of nausea brought on by the imbalance he felt as the walkway moved beneath his feet. He clenched his hands around the railing and waited for his stomach to settle as his trainer looked back at him.

The man chuckled but Will could barely see him in the dim light. He motioned his head for Will to follow.

“Good. Then the biggest risk you’ll have is the bigwigs losing their shit when you unbalance the PH of the tanks if you fall in. If you’re gonna fall, make sure you don’t knock any of the buckets or cleaning chemicals in with you. Some of this stuff is really delicate, so if you kill a specimen, gettin’ an earful will be the least of yer problems. Come on, watch yer step here.”

Will reached out to drag his fingers across the railing and maintain his balance while he walked. His eyes hadn’t adjusted to the darkness of the room and at this point, he was beginning to doubt they ever would. He listened to the whir of the filters, the hum of the climate controls, and the sound of his own clumsy steps echo around him. He cursed under his breath when he slammed the toe of his shoe into one of the steps and the man chuckled again, as if it happened all the time with new people.

“Can’t I use a flashlight?”

“Not in this exhibit, no. Don’t want to disturb the animals. They’re pretty sensitive to the light, so you’ll just have to manage. Don’t

worry, you'll get used to it. This one right here," he said, tapping the glass as he walked further up the exhibit steps, "is eight two steps. Just count 'em and you'll be fine. It'll be like second nature in no time, trust me."

"Okay," Will agreed, although he was sure he was going to end up kicking every third step for his entire tenure with the company. If nothing else, along with a broken toe or two, he'd at least get a bit of a workout climbing up and down all the stairs in this place.

"For this one, you gotta just get your towels, get your spray, and get it done. Can't drag the mop all the way up here, it's just not worth it. I've found about eight to ten rags is what you need to do the floors and railing here, but you bring more than you think you'll need till you get a rhythm down. Otherwise you'll just have to make the trip again, understand?"

"Sure, make's sense," Will agreed, trying to hide the way he was already panting from just the one trip up. Jesus, he needed to start jogging or something.

"Remember how I said the worst that was likely to happen if you fell in one of the tanks was having to pull yourself back out? Well, that's true for most of 'em, but this one you can't really get out of that easily. The catwalk's about forty, forty five feet up, you see?" He asked, motioning towards the tank below. "You fall into this and someone'll have to pull ya out, if ya get out at all. No ladders on this one."

Will laughed, a little nervous but not especially worried until the man didn't laugh with him.

"Why's this one so high up? Why no ladders? Isn't that a safety hazard? Doesn't OSHA have something to say about that?" he asked, glancing over the rail. It went up almost to the middle of his chest, a good six inches higher than the rest. At least he wasn't likely to topple over this one, even if he did lose his footing in the dark.

"Cause of what's in there. Heard it could jump twenty, twenty five feet, maybe more. I guess having the catwalk well out of reach is a must have for this one. I don't know about the ladder issue, you'll

have to take it up with HR. Maybe they haven't gotten around to building one yet."

Will nodded, though he had no intentions whatsoever of taking *anything* up with anyone. He lower he kept his profile, the better off he'd be. As far as he was concerned, the less people knew about him the better. He couldn't get in trouble if no one knew he existed and the best way to go unnoticed was by *not* filing a complaint or making a stink before he'd even finished his training.

"What, really? What's in there?" he asked, changing the subject so his trainer wouldn't think he was a rabble rouser. "Dolphins? I saw one at SeaWorld when I was a kid that could jump thirty feet up when the trainer asked it to."

"Dunno," the man said with a dismissive shrug. "Predator of some kind, but I doubt it. Don't know of any dolphins that live that deep down." He turned and gave Will a pointed look as Will gripped the railing even tighter. "Just make sure you don't lean against the access gate, got it? I mean, it should be locked, but you can't be too careful, you know?"

Will released the bar and nodded, a little unsettled.

"So like a Greenland or Goblin shark? Or a Bluntnose Sixgill? I didn't know they could breach."

"Listen kid," the man said with a gentle laugh. "I just clean. I don't know what's down there cause they never have the light on in here and whatever it is don't like to come too close to the glass. I seen it once, in passing, but you can never tell. It's big though. Maybe ten, twelve feet long? You'd be better off asking one of the scientists what's down there if you can ever find one. They're never 'round when I start my shift."

Will swallowed and looked down at the dark, placid water. There was nothing there to see aside from the gentle lapping of the thermal jets and aeration systems.

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He worked quietly and as efficiently as he could and for a few weeks, it was perfect. It was like having free tickets to the aquarium every day, and since he'd always loved to go as a kid, the job still hadn't quite lost its charm despite how under prepared he was for the actual physical labor involved in the work.

The hospital unit was his favorite and he found himself spending most of his breaks for meals just watching the animals there. It was fun to see the injured seals and sick fish get well again and he felt, in some way, like he was helping, if only by keeping their environment clean. The deep sea exhibit was the least exciting, though he still enjoyed it. Will still tripped over his feet when he worked, but he found himself looking into the tanks and watching the little glowing lights some of the fish emitted from time to time as they floated around the enclosures. They were pretty, like little moving lanterns carried by ghosts.

Lures, that's what the lights were, right? A way to entice prey closer, so they'd be easy to catch? Or was it to mark territory and attract a mate, like fireflies? Was it both? Will didn't know, but he thought he remembered reading that somewhere. The first time he saw a light in the deep tank, he thought he'd imagined it because it was so brief. It was just a flash of blue, dulled by how deep down it was and whatever decorations the researchers had placed in the enclosure to mimic the environment they'd found the tank's inhabitant in. It reminded him of what it was like to see shadow people on the side of the road when he drove or when he got a speck of dirt in his eyes.

Will stopped singing along to whatever it was he'd been listening to and pulled one of his ear buds out, as if that would help him see better. He sat up from where he'd been kneeling, scrubbing the chum from the catwalk that didn't make its way to the tank below during feeding time. He scooted over, looked through the bars of the rails, and waited, just to see if the light would return. He stayed that way, quietly watching for almost a full five minutes, but when nothing made itself known, he continued his task of cleaning up fish guts and blood.

The second time he saw the light was as he mopped the floor between the tanks. He'd been humming along to the melody in his ears, only singing the words he actually knew (completely off key he

was sure) and dancing with the mop as he moved. This time when it appeared, the light lingered, wove in and out of the concealed decorations and false reef of the tank. Will stopped his off tune song and set the mop in the bucket, spilling a little of the soapy water as he did, and walked closer to the tank for a better look. The tank itself went deep into the concrete, maybe sixty, seventy feet down before extending up an additional thirty or so for people to observe more easily. Whatever it was that resided in there, it had been expensive to house.

He stood away from the glass and craned his neck to see. It wasn't that he didn't trust the glass, but it still made him nervous to get too close. Ever since he started, Will had been afraid it would crack and break and he'd drown or whatever was in there would be set loose upon him. He especially hated cleaning above the tank. Something about seeing water so deep triggered some long buried fear in his primal, lizard brain. Even with the bars for protection, it made him irrationally afraid.

This time, instead of cleaning and wiping as quickly as he could while trying to avoid actually looking at the enclosure, Will took his time, let his eyes adjust and try to orient themselves to what they were seeing. There was nothing to be afraid of. Some engineers, probably the top of their class, had designed the enclosure and it was perfectly safe for him to approach and examine.

Something was moving in the tank, something with a pale, bioluminescent blue that faded and reappeared as it wove in and out of sight. When it got too low in the tank to be seen, Will crept closer and pressed his palm against the glass to get a better look. It was surprisingly warm, especially for something that enclosed a creature that lived so deep in the water. He paid no mind the palmprint he left since he'd planned on washing the glass anyway. He just wanted a quick look at what was swimming around down there, since it couldn't be any shark species he knew of. None of them produced the luciferin needed to make the light and as far as he knew, there were no other animals in this enclosure. Whatever the main specimen was, it was too aggressive for a community tank.

Will narrowed his eyes, trying to see where the light had gone, but it had disappeared once more. Against his better judgement, he reached

into his pocket and pulled out his phone. He didn't turn on the flashlight, just used the backlight to try and get a better look as he held it up to the glass. Will moved his phone from side to side, and its dim light cut surprisingly well through the clear water, allowing him to see about three or four feet in any direction he pointed the screen. He supposed that with the filtration system this tank held, it must have cleared all the sediment and particles from the chum he was always scrubbing up. He squinted, scanning the tank when the soft blue light emerged from... something. Was there a cave down there? Something man made for whatever was in the tank to hide in? Was it shy? Was that why Will's trainer hadn't ever gotten a good look at the thing?

Without thinking, Will rolled his thumb up the screen and adjusted the backlight, which he normally kept on one of the lowest settings to conserve the battery, to a brighter one.

Quite suddenly, the light in the tank went out.

He popped up on his toes, turned the phone to where he thought the animal might have gone, and frowned. There was nothing there; only empty, softly flowing water.

When something slammed against the glass, shaking it and shrieking, Will jerked back so hard he slipped in the water he'd spilled that he fell flat onto his back, knocking the air out of his lungs on impact. The phone lost its place in his hand and went sliding across the floor as he gasped and scrambled back and away from what he prayed was a reinforced tank because, quite frankly, whatever had hit the glass was big and it had teeth.

"Jesus, fuck!"

As quickly as was humanly possible considering how badly he was shaking, he flipped onto his stomach, soaking his shirt in the dirty, soapy water, and grabbed the phone. He rolled again, propped up only by his elbows, and turned the screen to the tank.

When he'd been told the fish was big, he hadn't really had an appreciation for just *how much* larger than him ten to twelve feet was. He had perspective for it now.

Whatever it was he was looking at, Will's brain simply refused to process. It was as if he had glanced the thing over and his brain had simply decided 'Um, no. Nice try, but I am not dealing with this right now.' Will kept staring, waiting for it all to make some kind of sense, but it didn't. The tail of the thing was so long that it made up more than Will's entire height. It was thick and muscular, with the underside a slightly lighter color than the rest of it, though what color it actually was was hard to say in the dark. Fine, okay, obviously something that lived that deep, something that was a predator needed to be big. But its skin didn't seem to have the sandpaper texture of a shark or the pale, translucence of jellyfish. Rather, the scales reflected the light the same way traffic cones did, making the thing stand out that much better and making it all the more confusing to look at. Because Will could deal with the tail and the long, flowing fins. The part his mind simply refused to process was the upper half of the thing.

The torso looked strangely humanoid, or some alien version of it. It had arms, a chest, and a snarling, angry mouth that showed off teeth so sharp Will was sure they could have cut clean through his arm in a single bite, bone and all. The tail slapped against the glass again, shaking it and making Will jump so hard he bit his own tongue. Then the light went out and was gone, lost again in the black water.

He shoved himself to his feet and sprinted as fast as he could across the room, not bothering to grab the mop as he ran. His sneakers slid across the soap, making him windmill his arms and for a moment, the safety training video he'd watched a few weeks prior played on a loop in his head, scolding him for not wearing no-slip shoes.

"No. Nope. No fucking way," he panted through chattering teeth as he leaned his back against the door on the farthest side of the room, as far away from the tank as he could get.

He kept his eyes locked on the enclosure, waiting for the blue light to show up again or for his mind to come up with a better explanation than there was a fucking alien in a tank less than a hundred feet away from him. He waited almost half an hour before accepting the glass would hold and he must have been imagining things before he found his nerve and crept back to retrieve the mop. He didn't bother to clean the glass, justifying it with the lack of time he had left rather

than the queasy feeling in his stomach and uncomfortable, primal fear of being confronted with something he had no logical explanation for. At least he had tomorrow off. Whether or not he came back after that was up for debate.

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Thanks to his car battery giving up on life and his starter behaving like it was thinking about pulling a Juliet to the battery's Romeo and following it to the land of the dead, Will found himself back at work two days later. Personally, he wanted to take the first train out of 'Nope' station and ride it all the way to 'Fuckthatville' and never set foot in the research facility ever again, but he had mounting bills to pay and until he found better employment, Will had little choice in the matter.

So, with that option taken away from him, Will once again found himself mopping the floors, sanitizing the railings, and watching the new penguin hatchling with a malformed wing poke its head out of the nest its caregivers had made for it. Will smiled as he cleaned the glass, trying to draw out the task as long as he could. Because the next place he needed to be, the only place he had left to clean, was the Deep Sea area.

And he *really* didn't want to go back there. He'd spent the entire previous day trying to work out exactly what it was he'd seen and the only explanation was that it *had* been a shark of some kind. He'd seen pictures of fish with strangely human faces before; blobfish, rays that looked like they were smiling, and carp with unique markings that made them look like a skull. He'd imagined the arms (obviously) and the torso could have been anything. Will didn't know much about animals and as far as his experience with fish went, he'd barely been able to keep his Zebra Danios alive for more than a few months at a time and they were supposed to be a fairly hardy species and 'perfect for beginners'.

Still, he couldn't avoid it forever, so cleaning cart in hand, he pushed his way into the room. Will worked slowly, avoiding the huge tank, the crown jewel of the center, and tried to keep his mind focused on the work. When it was all there was left, Will straightened his back, puffed his chest as he gave himself a *very* inspiring speech, and

started to work. He kept his head low, mopped near the tank without looking at it, and tried to drown out the feeling of his heart pounding away by turning the music up as loud as he could handle.

From time to time, he saw a twinkling in the water, but he refused to look at it, opting instead to ignore it completely. It was easier said than done. The soft light seemed to follow him as he moved, as if it was tracking him. Tracking or stalking. Sometimes it was constant, like someone had turned on a switch and that was that. Sometimes it seemed to flicker, like a bulb about to burn out or, in Will's opinion, like a scene from a horror movie when a character was walking down an unlit corridor towards certain death. The only time Will actually turned to look at it was when it faded in and out of view like a child playing with a dimmer switch.

Will glanced down through the slats of the floor as the thing in the tank circled below, flickering. Thank god for the height of the catwalk because once or twice, the thing below actually broke the surface of the water. Its dorsal fin created unsettling ripples, like it was testing, trying to decide if it could jump high enough and snag him. Maybe it was just waiting for him to fall in.

In his pocket, Will's phone vibrated, alerting him to a text message. He squatted down, balanced on his toes, and flicked his finger across the screen to unlock it. The brightness of the screen made him squint as he read the message. It was Lucas, reminding him *again* that he needed Will's half of that month's rent. Will sighed. He left it on read before pocketing the phone again and reaching for one of the clean rags.

He knew his half of the rent was late; it always was. Honestly it was a wonder Lucas bothered to text him about it at all anymore. They'd done this song and dance so many times, he should have known by now that Will would get it to him eventually. Will could already see the scene play out because it was one he'd lived a hundred times already. He'd slink in early, tail between his legs and slide the envelope with the cash under Lucas' door so he didn't wake him, and creep away to hide in his room to avoid the awkward conversation neither of them wanted to have about how Will needed to pull his weight and contribute. Will hated it, but the cycle of debt was never ending and no matter how hard he worked, as soon as he started to

get a savings built up, his car battery would quit or he'd need to go to an urgent care center for a case of pneumonia that wouldn't clear up on its own. Then there were the costs for the prescriptions they'd write, and before long he'd need new tires or to make a student loan payment, and the cycle would start again.

Beneath him, he heard the water splash and that fading blue light brightened, catching his attention.

Will leaned over, gripped the railing between his fingers from where he sat, and looked down.

The animal was circling below, in a wide, almost lazy pattern. Will watched it, terrified, as the edges of its fluke and dorsal fin lit up, illuminating the thing more clearly. This time when he looked, even his mind's stubborn attempt to rationalize what he was seeing finally gave up and just accepted the impossible.

The animal *did* have arms, or something like them. They looked almost like a normal person's, if a little long. Almost. For them to look human you had to ignore the length of the fingers. That and the claws.

It had a human torso and a tall, frilled spine that ran from the top of its head down the length of its back before exploding into the dorsal fin he'd seen break the water's surface earlier. Will couldn't see its face, just the outline of frills that blew out and lit up, like a lion fish had swallowed a string of Christmas lights.

Will was looking at something from world mythology: a dryad, a nymph, a naiad. He was looking at a fucking mermaid.

"No," he said, perfectly calm as what he assumed was shock set in. He shook his head and continued staring at the thing as it circled below. "No, no, no. That's impossible. There's no such thing. Get a grip, Byers. If those things existed, they would have been found by now. Someone would have recorded it and it would have ended up on YouTube or Reddit and you would know about it."

The argument seemed stupid, even to him. Clearly they *did* exist if he was looking right at one. It didn't look anything like the beautiful

women in the story books, with flowing hair and clamshell bras. It was a monster, almost twice Will's size from head to tail, and if the teeth and claws were anything to go by, not a friendly one. It didn't have pretty green scales that glistened in the sun; this thing was *dark*, shades of black and purple. It was perfect for hiding in the deep ocean.

Because if there was anywhere something like this could have existed unnoticed, it was down there, wasn't it? Down where no one could explore properly, down where all the rest of the monsters lived.

The thing looked up and the light it emitted reflected off its black, saucer eyes. It was looking at Will.

He scooted away from the rail, pretty sure it was too high for something like that to jump up to, and tried to sit directly in the middle of the catwalk. He would have felt better if he'd been on one of the runways against the wall, just so he had something solid to lean against, but he'd been cleaning the one that went directly over the center of the tank, where they fed what Will was still trying to convince himself was just a very unique looking shark. He felt a wave of nausea as the vertigo set in again and tucked his head between his knees.

The water splashed again and Will peeked out from between his fingers. He couldn't see the creature, not from where he was hiding in the center of the walkway, but he could see the light. Will refused to move, almost forgot to even breathe until the light went out. He didn't know what the fuck was in the water or what it was capable of, but if the light *was* a lure, there was *no way in hell* he was going to look at it. Folklore came from somewhere and even though the shriek he'd heard two days ago wasn't anything he would have considered alluring, Siren stories came from somewhere and he wasn't taking any chances.

Once the light was gone and the water was back to the gentle burbling of the vents and filtration system, Will forced himself to stand, and he fled.

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Will stood, wide eyed and shocked in the office he'd been called into. He looked at the monitors, watched himself in an off putting, sickly green, leaning over to look through the railing over the tank while whatever swam beneath flared and faded. He swallowed hard and glanced at the blond woman behind the desk as she observed his reaction to the footage.

"Mr. Byers—"

"-Ma'am, I swear, I haven't said anything to anyone."

She blinked.

"Well I should hope not, considering the NDA you signed when you were hired. I can't imagine that someone," she glanced down to his dollar store shoes and thrift store jeans. "Would willingly put themselves in a position to be sued for breach of contract."

"I didn't. I swear."

"Well, that's reassuring," she said with a sigh as she laced her fingers together.

"I didn't even mean to look. I mean, it was an accident."

The woman glanced at the film, at Will peering down into the water where the creature swam. The light it emitted made it difficult to see on the grainy film. It just looked like a moving, twisting glow.

"An accident. Of course. Well, be that as it may—"

"-Please don't fire me," he interjected. "I really need this job."

"Be that as it may, Mr. Byers, something has to be done. You *did* see the specimen, and as you can see," she said, indicating the film. "It had a reaction."

"Reaction?"

"The cold light? See how its photophores are lighting up? We've not observed that particular behavior before."

“I’m so sorry,” he rushed to apologize. “I didn’t mean to upset it. I don’t know what I did, but I swear I won’t do it again. Please don’t fire me.”

“Mr. Byers, calm down. I’m not going to fire you. I’d like to offer you a position.”

“I- I already have a position here,” he whispered. “Don’t I? If you’re not firing me?”

“No, Mr. Byers, we aren’t going to fire you. On the contrary. We’d like to offer you a promotion. The new position is fairly simple and all you have to do is let us observe you.”

“Observe... me?” Will asked, shrinking in the chair. “Why?”

“Not *you* exactly, but the way the undine reacts to you. We want to map its behavior, and because this one is new, it needs further observation and study.”

“Undine? Is that um, what’s in the tank? What it’s called, I mean?”

“For the time being.”

Will laughed nervously, a little relieved that he hadn’t imagined the whole thing.

“I thought it was a mermaid,” he said, still laughing a little.

“Well, it’s a male, so *mermaid* might not be quite right in this case. But you’re free to think of him as you like.”

Will swallowed, a little taken aback that someone had acknowledged, without even blinking, that there was a fucking mermaid (merman?), much less in a tank in the same building as them.

“Does um, does he have a name?”

“We’ve taken to calling him Mike.”

“Mike?” Will asked, almost laughing again. It was just... so *common*.

“For Michael Dorn. He’s a bit aggressive, like a Klingon. Stupid, I know, but I lost the draw,” she said with a shrug.

“And what do you want me to do exactly?” Will asked, a little nervous at hearing about the creature’s aggression. He’d seen it lash out once and wasn’t sure how comfortable he was interacting with something that looked like it could shred him if it wanted, and it certainly *seemed* like it might have found the idea of tearing him limb from limb a grand idea. He supposed he’d just have to trust the glass to hold.

“Nothing, not at first. We just want you to spend time around the tank. About six hours five days a week. We just want to observe the reactions and any interactions. If things go well, we might have specific tasks or behaviors we’d like you to perform to see if they provoke a predictable, measurable reaction from the undine.”

Will felt his leg begin to bounce as he tried to do the math in his head. It was ten hours less than he usually worked and if he accepted the cut in hours, he wouldn’t even be pulling four hundred a week before taxes. He wouldn’t even be able to draw on full time benefits like medical insurance if he didn’t work full time. He ran his tongue over his teeth, nervous. Last year he’d chipped a tooth and couldn’t afford to go to a dentist, so he’d smoothed the broken one down himself with a metal nail file. What was he supposed to do if he took the offer and something else happened? Did he need to get a second job? Maybe they’d let him politely refuse and he could keep the job he already had?

“I... I mean, it sounds interesting and all but... I don’t know if I can really afford to, um, to not work full time,” he whispered apologetically as he tugged at the hem of his uniform.

“Mr. Byers, the position comes with a pay increase. I assure you, you’d be properly compensated for your time.”

“And medical?” he asked, feeling braver. Part of him wanted to ask exactly what ‘properly compensated’ meant, but another part of him felt that would be too rude. “I, I need health insurance.”

Even if it was ridiculously bad and the copays made him feel faint.

On top of the benefit of not having to interact with customers, Will had been drawn to the job because it offered insurance immediately instead of having to wait for the once a year enrollment period to come around. But if he wasn't full time, he didn't qualify.

"And you'll have it," she said with the wave of a hand. She tapped the folder on her desk, the one Will had been sure was hiding his termination papers, and slid it forward. "Your new contract. Have a look and when you're ready, we'll get started."

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Will stood, hovering and wringing his hands as he looked at the tank. He'd been told that all he had to do was stay near it and do whatever came naturally. They even told him he was allowed to read or sleep if he wanted, though if he wanted to read it would have to be on the phone or a tablet on a low light setting. Absolutely no light brighter than what the undine itself could produce were allowed, as artificial light above 4.9 W had the potential to damage or destroy deep sea animal's vision completely. Will felt a surge of guilt that he'd turned the brightness of his screen up to try and find the undine before. Maybe that's why it had attacked the glass. Maybe Will had accidentally hurt it.

'I understand but... I can't really see it unless it does that, what did you call it? Cold light? How am I supposed to know if it even knows I'm there?'

'Trust me, he knows you're there. It's been observed to monitor people who come in and out of the enclosure area. We believe he recognizes individuals and faces quite well. That's why we're interested in you. Mike seems to have taken an interest in you. The only other time he reacts with his photophores at all is during a feeding session.'

'Do I have to feed it?' Will asked, thinking about all the fish guts he'd had to clean. He really didn't want to have to stick his hand in a bucket of dead things and drop them from the catwalk down.

'Not yet, not right away. Just relax, Mr. Byers. All we want is to watch what he does.'

'Can I at least have a pair of those?' Will asked, motioning to the night vision goggles hanging on the wall. 'So I can see it too?'

'I'm afraid not. They seem to confuse his facial recognition.'

Will shifted his weight from foot to foot, trying to let his eyes adjust to the dark. He could barely see anything, much less any movement that may or may not be happening in the tank. He glanced up at the blinking red light of the camera, unsure what he was supposed to do. Every time he'd been in this room before, Will had been working to pass the time. Without some clear direction and knowing that there were eyes on him from behind the camera and behind the glass of the tank, even if he couldn't see them, made Will feel incredibly uneasy.

He tapped his fingers against his thighs and looked back to the enclosure. He felt foolish just standing while nothing happened, so after a moment, he started walking. He walked around the entire diameter, counting his steps as he went until he ended up back at the steps to the catwalk where he'd started. As far as he could tell, there was no reaction. He started walking again, this time counting out loud. It was about forty five around. If the tank was somewhere around ninety feet in height, which was a pure guess since he couldn't see how far down it went, that was around a million gallons of water, wasn't it? Will placed a hand against the glass, recalling how it had shaken when the undine had slammed into it.

'It's fine. They wouldn't spend the money unless the glass would hold. Stop working yourself up.'

He pulled his hand away and sighed. He looked back up at the camera again, a little self conscious that nothing of interest had happened yet. Still, he'd been told that they weren't expecting him to do much of anything and that Will was free to do what he wanted, so he flopped down on the concrete and crossed his legs. He pulled his phone out and started up Netflix, curious if he'd even get a signal in here. All the music and audio books were things he'd already downloaded. Would he even be able to stream anything here?

The phone stuttered a little, buffered for longer than he would have liked, but it eventually loaded. The first things in his suggested videos were horror movies, but since he sort of felt like he was stuck in one

already, he opted to search for something more light hearted. He settled for a documentary about dogs, remembering the one he'd had as a kid. Sometimes Will missed having a pet, but if he couldn't even pay his rent on time, how was he supposed to afford a dog? They needed vaccinations and checkups, toys to keep them entertained, and someone who had the energy to exercise and walk them regularly. Still, there was something about puppy breath and how much they wiggled that made his heart sing, and Will liked to visit the local shelters just to hold them sometimes.

Halfway through the documentary, his back started to ache from how he bent over himself the way he was, so he scooted closer to the tank, his back to it, so he had something to lean against while he watched.

The glass will hold, it's fine.

Once in a while he glanced over his shoulder, nervous that he'd turn and see something looking back. At least he got a warning when he did. The light from his phone was dim, on the lowest setting he could make it, but the colors flared from time to time and reflected against the glass. Behind him, a light flared back.

Will turned, so slow he felt like someone had turned him on half speed or filled his body with sand. He looked, eyes wide, and those black, saucer eyes looked back at him. The spines around the face flared, illuminating it and Will almost swallowed his tongue. The face was strangely beautiful, and horribly frightening. It was angular, adored with half a dozen long, glowing spines and frills, accentuating its shape. Will stared, unable to move as the undine swayed where it floated. Will watched it rise up in the water, his eyes moving to what looked like red, gaping wounds around its chest. Gill, Will realized with a start. Its underbelly was pale, maybe violet while the scales on its pectoral and pelvic fins were black as the water around it. The only reason he could see them at all was because of the photophores on the ventral and lateral structures of the undine's body.

He felt his teeth start to chatter uncontrollably as he watched the thing sway in the water, carried by the currents of the filtration system before it flicked it's fins and returned to where it had started. Will felt his hands start to shake and he set the phone, screen down, on his thigh so he didn't drop it again. Though, truth be told, he

wasn't sure next to his knee was the place to put the phone since those were shaking too.

"H- hey there," Will whispered, amazed that he could speak at all.

The undine tilted its head and its long, slender ears twitched and rotated, like it was trying to pick up on the sound. Will cleared his throat and tried again, a little louder.

"I'm um, I'm Will. They said your name is Mike but uh, I don't know. Do you have names? Your kind, I mean? Are there more of you? They said you're the only one here, in the tank I mean," he babbled, feeling like an idiot.

The undine, Mike, swiveled its ears again and swam a little lower, as if it was trying to hear better but was having trouble through the glass. Will watched it, horrified and fascinated as it got closer. It was big, but the bulk of it seemed to be in the undine's tail. The rest of him seemed to be more or less proportionately on par with what Will considered to be human. Maybe he was a little wider than Will, or maybe it was an illusion from the fins and flaring gills, but if his tail and fins were all removed, they might have been at a height with one another. When it raised one clawed, webbed hand, Will reconsidered how 'human' he thought it actually was.

When it opened its mouth as if to speak, Will blanched and rethought the whole idea of it seeming human all together.

Because its teeth were nothing short of monstrous. They were sharp as knives, with fangs as long as at least two joints of Will's fingers, and there were two rows of them. Will stayed as still as he could. At least, as still as he could until the undine shrieked again, like it had when he'd shown his phone screen light on it before. When it did that, Will jerked back and covered his ears to shield himself from the sound. The movement seemed to upset the undine and it slammed its tail against the glass, making it shake and Will scrambled away. He crawled on his knees as the light the undine emitted flared around him, showing off the impressive set up the researchers had provided it, and showing off it's even more impressive physicality. No wonder there was no ladder in the tank. The undine might not have even needed legs to pull itself up.

Will crawled away as quickly as he could while still covering his ears as the undine slammed its fluke against the glass again.

"I'm sorry!" he gasped, ears ringing from how loud the scream was and how hard his heart was pounding, sending all the blood rushing to his head. "Jesus Christ!"

He curled around himself and waited for the people watching to intervene or the noise to fade. The scream stopped first and Will resigned himself to the fact that unless he was in real danger, not just terror of something that was trapped and couldn't hurt him, no one was going to step in. When the noise had quieted down and Will no longer felt like his bowels were about to liquify, he looked back up.

The undine was circling around the tank, watching Will and letting it's light fade in and out in a gentle, more soothing pattern. It wove up and down, in and out of the decorations before stopping where Will had been sitting, watching his documentary. Will stayed quiet for a while before slowly rising to his feet and he swayed too, trying to find his balance. The undine looked at him, flicked its ears in his direction, and bared its teeth before diving away. Will didn't see it again for the rest of his shift.

2. Chapter 2

Summary for the Chapter:

Will finds himself participating in tasks meant to evoke a reaction from Mike. Mike lashes out.

Notes for the Chapter:

CW: mild gore and depictions of dead animals.

Two weeks went by with very little in way of excitement or interaction with the undine, and for a while, Will thought they were going to fire him after all. If there was nothing to observe, what was the point in paying him damn near seven hundred a week to sit on his ass and watch television or listen to music? But no one told him he was fired and Will really needed the money, so he came back, day after day and sat around waiting for something to happen. Two or three times, Will would catch the undine watching him from the dark and flaring his photophores, but whenever he'd look up, Mike would slip away into the black of the water, making himself nothing but a ghostly specter, barely visible at all.

'Do you remember what we talked about, how we might ask you to perform certain behaviors or tasks?'

'Yeah.'

'Well, we'd like you to take this wireless speaker, set it up, and turn on your music.'

'What? Why?'

'Mike seems interested in it. We want you to set it up on the walkway and see if he comes up to listen.'

'Okay. I can do that.'

The woman smiled to herself and tucked a strand of short, blond hair behind her ear.

'And it's alright if you feel like singing. We'd like to get him used to the sound of your voice.'

'I- I'm not a very good singer, Ma'am.'

'Nonsense. We've watched the tapes from before the observational period. They record sound, you know,' she pointed out as Will blushed so hard he felt feverish. God, all he wanted to do was curl up and die.

Will didn't really like the sound of his own voice, especially when he was singing, but he'd found himself doing it anyway, just to stave off the boredom. Of course, that had been before he'd known the camera picked up sound. Now he practiced counting the steps up and down the catwalk, and how many feet it was from one end of the walkway to the other, and how many plates made up each segment of the platform. Beneath him, the undine circled, as if he was counting how many times he had to pump each fin to make it from one end of the tank to the other, the same way Will counted the steps. Despite the size and cost of the enclosure, Will felt sorry for the thing. It must be horribly boring to have nothing new to see or explore, especially if he'd been meant to live in the wild, with infinite space to swim. Sometimes Will wondered if it curled up and stayed hidden in its cave because it was depressed rather than shy. Was that possible? Did it have high enough cognitive function to even *get* depressed? Will knew some animals got anxiety and that it could cause aggression, but boredom? Depression? He didn't know, but Mike's endless circles reminded him of a tiger in a cage, endlessly pacing, or a dog that chased its tail with lips drawn back in a snarl, with no semblance of joy in the act.

Will set the speaker down and turned on the bluetooth pairing to sync up his phone. When it was done, he picked the most lowkey playlist he had and turned it on. Even at the low volume he'd selected, the music sounded too loud and it echoed around the room. If Will had been alone with no observers, he might have marveled at how great the acoustics were in this place, but since he knew half the scientists and all of their lab assistants were watching him, he only felt exposed. Maybe the echoes would drown out the sound of his own voice and no one would hear him at all.

How loud was he supposed to make the music? He'd been told that

the undine, Mike, could hear exceptionally well, and considering how it's long, tapered ears swiveled around like satellite dishes, Will believed it. Maybe only certain frequencies were amplified while others barely registered. Because with how loud the banshee's wail it let out was before, Will was surprised it hadn't hurt itself when it screamed. It had certainly hurt *him*.

Will turned the volume down a little, just in case, and continued his trek around the catwalk, counting his steps and, despite himself, singing along under his breath. As he walked, he kept his eyes focused on the water below. Every now and again, he'd see Mike's dorsal fin and the spines that proceeded it break the surface of the water, but he never raised his head or created the soft, blue light Will associated with him. Maybe he didn't like music. At least he wasn't screaming, thrashing in the water, or showing any other obvious signs of displeasure. He moved in what Will assumed was the slow, lazy pattern Will was used to, but without the light, it was hard to tell. The undine would break water and disappear again only to emerge on the opposite side of the tank before repeating the pattern. Will sat down, back against the painted wall, and watched.

For his part, Mike seemed to emerge more often at the high notes and Will whistled along with them, curious as to whether or not it would make a difference. It seemed to, and Mike popped his head up a few feet away from the edge of the tank, ears twitching, and glowed softly. Will scooted closer. If he wasn't worried about the undine breaching the water and grabbing him, he might have dangled his legs and swung his feet in beat to the tune. Instead, he kept his feet firmly planted beneath his thighs and watched.

When Mike whistled back, Will almost fainted. It was a loud, shrill noise that sounded unpracticed and sloppy. It kept breaking and fading away, but when Will found his senses and whistled back, the undine below him tried again.

"Do you like the music?" Will asked, unsure. The black void of eyes beneath him blinked and whistled again in response. Will hesitated. Did he really have to sing? Wouldn't just talking help Mike get used to the sound of his voice just as well? He took a breath as a song he at least knew the lyrics if not the tone to came on and tried his best.

He sang softly, voice cracking and certain he was flat as roadkill, while Mike circled below. For his efforts, Will was rewarded with an enthusiastic flair of light and Mike breaking the water again before slapping it with his tail. Okay, that seemed like a good sign, right? At least the researchers would have something to take notes on. Will edged closer until his hands were actually dangling out from the slats in the bars.

Best of all, Mike made sounds in return, though Will wouldn't have called it a song. It was like the scream he'd done before, but softer, less intense. Will froze, wondering if he'd upset the undine, but Mike never increased the volume of the sound and when he was done, he stayed floating beneath Will as if he was expecting something in return.

"That's very nice," Will offered, pressing his forehead to the bars to see beneath him more clearly. "Thank you for sharing it. Sorry I'm off key, I'm not very good at this. I feel a little silly talking to you, honestly. You can't understand, can you? I'd guess not, at least not more than a few words."

Even dogs and cats knew a few words: their names, 'walk', and simple instructions. How much did Mike understand? Did any of the researchers try to train or test him, or had it been all observation and samples? Will shifted and pulled his phone out, shuffling through the songs and artists looking for something he might have an easier time mimicking. When he did, Mike flared a little brighter.

Will stopped what he was doing and looked down. Was the light bothering Mike? It wasn't very bright, but maybe it hurt his eyes? The light Mike emitted seemed brighter to Will, but maybe it was reflected on a different part of the color spectrum and the phone came off as more intense to the undine than his own luminescence. Will shut the phone off and pocketed it again, content to just wait for a song he knew to play on its own. Beneath him, Mike's light faded.

Will tried whistling again, but Mike's light only flickered in response before fading again. He didn't know why, but the lack of reaction disappointed him and Will found himself looking down into the dark water, waiting for the surface to break again. It didn't.

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'I'm really not comfortable with this,' Will said as he was handed a pair of thick, rubber gloves and a bucket full of fish parts.

'I understand, but you did sign the contract and we did discuss this,' the woman, Dr. Frazier said, staring him down until Will ducked his head, unable to keep eye contact. 'We've observed the undine reacting to sound, to the light of your phone, and to your presence in general. We want to know what he does when we change the feeding schedule and who offers the food. For the most part, from past experience at least, he responds with aggression towards his feeder. The light pattern is more similar to marking territory than attracting a mate. We're just curious how he'll respond to someone he's shown some sort of attachment to offering the food.'

'What do you mean attachment?' Will asked, stomach still turning at the sight of the dismembered and disemboweled fish. Their cold, flat eyes looked back at him, accusatory, like it was his fault they were dead.

'Haven't you noticed? He comes to the glass and waits, sometimes up to an hour before your shift starts. He emits a distinct pattern when you arrive and again when you leave. It's clear he recognizes you and when you'll be coming, and has some sort of interest in you that he doesn't extend to the rest of the care staff. On days you're off, he stays near the bottom of the tank, usually in one of the coral formations. We can't seem to tempt him out with anything other than food and even then, we're usually met with hostile behavior.'

Mike knew when Will was coming? He waited for him? It was true that even Will had noticed the gentle, soft light pattern Mike gave off when Will came or went, but he'd never thought much of it. The only time he really noticed a change in it was when he'd discovered that Mike responded to the light of his phone and the images on it. It was almost as if Mike was trying to mimic the patterns as they flashed across the screen. If Will covered and uncovered it a certain number of times, Mike would respond with the same amount of flares in return. It was interesting and Will had considered trying to teach Mike to communicate that way; a 'one blink for yes, two for no' sort of thing. But he never had and no one had ever told him to. Will shifted his weight from foot to foot.

'Is that why you called me in early today? To see if he'd recognize me outside of the time I normally come?'

'Partially. We're just curious, Mr. Byers. We appreciate your cooperation in this endeavor.'

'Does it have to be bloody fish guts? Can't I just give him whole fish?'

'We've found that the undine doesn't respond at all to dead fish in the water. The blood seems to help attract his attention at least.'

'Maybe he's bored. You said he's a predator. Maybe he wants to hunt.'

'You'd have us feed him live animals? Mr. Byers, we're a conservatory and research center. It's against our code of ethics to do such things.'

But it's not against your code of ethics to keep him trapped and isolated? Sure, that makes sense..

Will stood outside the door, bucket in hand, and hesitated. He felt clumsy and stupid in the tyvek suit that was meant to protect his clothing. It was hot, and wouldn't do anything to help Mike recognize him, especially since Will had taken to wearing his own clothes instead of the janitorial uniform he'd started out in. This suit looked scary, even to him. It was too big and made him feel like he was about to enter some hazardous waste site instead of an aquarium enclosure. With the gloves and rubber boots, he felt down right clumsy, and considering his already lacking dexterity, that was really saying something.

He sighed and pushed the door open to stumble into the dark room, feeling awkward and off balance. He walked towards Mike's tank, but there was no greeting light there, nor any sign of movement at all. Will walked along the diameter of the glass towards the stairs, half expecting Mike to pop up at any moment and rub against the glass like a cat while his black and purple scales shimmered and shown in the dark. It was the way he'd been greeting Will for the last month and it hurt, perhaps unnecessarily, when it didn't happen. Dr. Frazier had told him Mike might not recognize him at this time of day and Will was certain the getup wasn't helping with that.

He climbed the stairs by memory, only tripping once when he caught the toe of the rubber boot on one. He didn't spill the bucket or topple down them, so he supposed that was about as good as he could hope for. He waddled across the landing towards the walkway, already sweating inside the plastic that covered him, and paused to look down. Beneath him, Mike had stirred. The water was churning, as if Mike was swimming at a much faster rate than Will had ever seen, and his usually soothing light was bright and flickering, like a lightbulb about to burst. The last time Will had seen Mike do that had been before the undine had gotten used to him and settled into the pattern of dimming and brightening slowly as way of greeting. This looked a lot more angry and less inviting than Will was used to, and he felt his heart thump with fear.

He wanted to call out, push the hood back and remove the goggles, just to let Mike know it was just him, but Dr. Frazier had asked him to refrain, at least for a while, to see if Mike would be able to identify him without the help of auditory cues. Will wasn't sure how Mike was supposed to do that considering the change of time, the change of clothes, and the reek of blood and guts in the air. He wouldn't even be able to recognize Will's footsteps on the stairs or walkway because the ungainly boots made him so graceless Will could barely walk at all, let alone at his normal gait.

Cringing as he did, Will reached into the bucket and pulled out a handful of meat. He was grateful the railing was as high as it was because when he tried to toss the stuff over, he felt so off balance and disgusted he almost fell. Jesus, he was making a mess. No wonder there was always so much disgusting shit to scrub off the floor up here.

He tried again and managed to get most of it over the railing and into the water. Beneath him, the water churned and Will watched in disgusted fascination as Mike snapped up the bits of fish, crushing the bones between his teeth and holding the larger pieces between his webbed fingers as he tore at them.

A little nauseated from the vertigo and the bloody show below, Will threw more in and watched Mike tear through it. The light pattern didn't seem to be getting any more relaxed and Will was suddenly very grateful he'd never been diagnosed with a seizure disorder. Even

without one, the flickering was making him dizzy and uncomfortable. He wanted to be done with this as quickly as he could.

Rushing his way through the task, Will tossed handful after handful of the slick and bloody meat over the rail. Occasionally he still dropped some on the stainless steel beneath his boots and he'd squish it between the slats when he moved. It really shouldn't have surprised him as much as it did when, that in his haste to be done, he slipped.

Will felt his foot slide out from beneath him and saw himself topple, as if he was observing from outside his own body. The catwalk was only three feet wide but the space between the railings was, unfortunately, enough to have an arm or a leg slip through; a lesson he learned first hand when he went down. The catwalk shuddered against the chains that held it up and Will thought he might puke when it swayed. He was used to a little movement when he walked up and down and a few vibrations when he set the speaker down to play music, but this felt damn near like being on one of those plastic, suspended bridges some playgrounds had at them. He had no idea if it was what a real, functional suspended bridge felt like, as he'd never been on one, but this felt exceptionally unsafe and he wanted off. Now.

At least he was wearing the suit. Without it, he would have soaked his clothes and be forced to throw them away rather than spend the time and money scrubbing the filth off of them.

Beneath him, the water churned in what looked like excitement and the light flared so bright, he wanted to cover his eyes. Will tried to pull his leg free from where he'd trapped it between the safety bars, but that just made the catwalk sway harder, made him feel sicker.

“D- Doctor Frazier!” he called. “Ma’am, I’m stuck!”

Whether or not she heard him (and whether or not she cared) was sort of irrelevant. The lightshow that had been making him dizzy was starting to become frenzied as Will twisted his head to look between the cracks of the flooring. Mike was breaking the water in his excitement at what was happening above him, making it splash up against the sides of the unfilled glass. Will froze when he saw the

light fade, as if Mike was diving low into the tank. He took a breath to call out again but nothing came out. The light was back, and it was moving fast. *Really* fast. It was coming right for him.

Will couldn't help the scream that escaped him when Mike broke the water's surface as he jumped. Holy *shit* he could jump high. It was like he'd been waiting for his moment, biding his time and his energy to make the leap and for a terrible, heart stopping second, Will thought there was *no way* the forty foot height difference between the waters surface and the bottom of the catwalk would be enough. He tugged on his leg again and swore Mike's claws only missed the boot by what seemed like inches, though it was probably more likely to be by a feet. Will screamed again and closed his eyes as he struggled to get himself free and back on his feet as he heard Mike's body hit the water's surface again and the light faded. Mike was going to try and jump again.

"Wait! Wait wait wait! Mike! It's me!" he shouted, as loud as he could. Will had always tried to keep the volume of his voice low, so he didn't hurt Mike's ears or upset him. Now he screamed as loud and as long as he could, praying there would be some kind of recognition in the undine, and that it would care.

"Mike! God dammit! It's Will! Stop! Stop it!"

Will heard the water break again as Mike launched himself up and he squeezed his eyes closed, fully prepared to have his leg amputated at the knee. He heard a splash again then quiet. When he got up the courage to open his eyes and look, Mike was circling below him in the water, his nauseating, strobing light pattern slowing. Will blinked down at him through the cracks between the floor plates and found himself panting, breathing in the stomach turning sent of raw fish as he tried to steady himself. After a moment, Mike's head emerged and Will heard a whistle.

It was hard to whistle back when his teeth were chattering the way they were, but Will tried anyway. He managed a small sound, but it was weak and pathetic, even to him. Mike kept circling, kept whistling, and the steady, gentle ebb and flow of his light almost seemed like an apology. Will kept his eyes trained on the light, not even registering when the catwalk started to sway again and he heard

footsteps hurrying in his direction.

He registered the shot though and he froze, stunned when the whistling turned to that ear piercing shriek and Mike dove down, his light going out entirely. Will looked over his shoulder to see a man with a gun staring into the water, like he was trying to line up another shot.

“Hey, wait! What are you doing?” Will gasped, finally just yanking his foot free and dropping the boot that had trapped it into the tank below.

“It’s just a tranquilizer, it’ll be fine. Are you injured?”

“No, he didn’t get me,” Will whispered, searching the darkness of the tank for movement.

“Don’t worry. It’s not going to jump again. I think I got a clean shot on it, so with any luck, it’ll be out for a few hours,” the man said, glancing over at Will. “Let’s get you out of here.”

“O- okay,” Will agreed, getting shakily to his feet. He allowed the other man to support him as he made his way down the stairs and out of the room. Will was grateful for the help and he doubted he’d have been able to manage it on his own. He was too distracted by trying to search the tank in the darkness for wherever it was Mike had ended up after being shot.

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‘Mr. Byers, I’m so relieved you were unharmed.’

‘Yeah, me too.’

‘We knew it was aggressive, but we had no idea he’d try and attack you. From previous observations, we’d assumed it would react more favorably.’

‘It probably would have helped if you’d let me talk to him and not wear that ridiculous getup. He didn’t recognize me.’

‘Still, the aggression is worse than we’d anticipated. It’s really troubling.’

'Why? He's a predator. You put him in a cage with nothing to do, nothing to hunt, and expected him to just be docile? What else was he supposed to do, especially in the middle of a feeding? How did you want him to react?'

'We had hoped it would be able to be trained. The amount of money needed to house and study something like this is more than you think, I assure you. We'd hoped to recoup some of the losses by allowing people to observe him, for a fee of course.'

'Like at a zoo?'

'No, of course not. We have no intention of moving him. We would offer private showings here, at the facility.'

'And now you won't?'

'What would you have me do, Mr. Byers? He attacked the one person we'd thought he'd developed a relationship with. We can't have him attacking paying guests.'

'So what are you going to do with him?'

'For now, nothing. He's being transported to a hospital tank and then we'll make a decision from there.'

'A hospital tank?'

'To assess his injuries and treat them. The tank's not prepared as of yet, so he's in holding.'

'Can I see him?'

'You want to see him?'

'Of course I do. He's probably confused and scared. I don't want him to think I did that to him.'

Dr. Frazier smiled.

'If you want.'

Will looked down at the tank, if you could even call it that, and

grimaced. It looked more like a coffin, albeit a very large one. It was barely three feet deep and maybe fifteen feet long, but the water only came up to cover most of Mike's tail and chest. The rest of him, his neck and head were exposed to the air. Mike was trapped into it, his powerful tail latched down, with matching straps up and down his torso. Over his head was a sack, almost like a falconer's hood, to protect his eyes from the harsh lights overhead. There was something akin to a muzzle over the hood, preventing him from using his fearsome teeth to shred the straps and set himself free. The tank was just deep enough to keep him doused in water and Will watched quietly as Mike's red, inflamed gills flared open and closed as he breathed. The only indication that he was awake was the occasional flexing of the muscles in his tail and stomach as he tested the strength of the bonds that held him.

Will kneeled next to the tank, put a hand on it, and tried to figure out what to do. He'd never gotten a good look at Mike before. He was almost painfully beautiful and strangely otherworldly, even brought so low and helpless.

His scales were black, blacker than even obsidian, and the violet of his belly had beautiful, shimmering blues that veined out through his banding of his fins. In the light, he looked almost like an oversized beta fish. Will never realized just how big some of his fins were, or how delicate, until they were exposed beneath the light and crammed into such a small tank. His tail and torso may have been strong, nothing but muscle, but the rest of his appendages and their accessories looked closer in texture to butterfly wings than anything else, and Will felt certain a child could have ripped them clean off.

Will let his eyes wander, entranced by what he was able to see so clearly for the first time. The banding of the pectoral fins beneath his arms looked like they were bleeding and torn, probably from struggling against the restraints. Some of the scales down his flank and tail were ripped off, exposing the muscle beneath them. It looked like he'd been dragged across sandpaper or concrete, and Will supposed he must have struck something on his way down from the surface. Will wanted to reach out and touch them, wondering if they would be slimy or smooth, but he didn't. Instead he scooted closer and saw Mike twitch under the hood, before a low, blood curdling

growl escaped from beneath it.

Will swallowed, trying to find his voice.

“Mike, it’s me. It’s Will,” he whispered, actually aware that this was the closest he’d ever been to the undine. Even at a whisper he worried he was too loud, but Mike didn’t jerk or show any signs of pain.

Will saw the pretty, purple fluke flop weakly, as if Mike was trying to propel himself somewhere. Thanks to the restraints, he couldn’t even get enough momentum to thrash his tail properly. Will wiggled closer and raised a hand, just above the hood and Mike strained as if to try and scent him through the leather.

“Are you okay? Does it hurt?”

With the muzzle, Mike couldn’t even whistle properly. He tried, but nothing came out but a muffled rasp. Instead, he made a soft rumbling; not quite a growl, but something near it. Will slowly lowered his hand into the water and laid it on Mike’s arm. Beneath him, the undine twitched again and Will saw Mike’s webbed fingers flex and relax. Was it okay to touch Mike? No one was stopping him and there were certainly people watching. He stroked his hand down the scales, trying his best to keep from rubbing them the wrong direction. They were smooth and warm, not a hint of slime to be found. When he touched them, Mike glowed, just a little. It was almost unnoticeable in the oppressive light, but it was there. Will stroked down the arm again, throat tight.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know they’d hurt you. It wasn’t your fault, it was a really shitty thing to do. I think they did it on purpose, you know? To try and trick you. Shit, I’m so sorry. I didn’t think that would happen. I’m really sorry.”

There was a low, whining hiss that ended in something almost like a growl. It sounded suspiciously close to a word and Will sat frozen, certain he’d imagined it.

Because no one had said Mike could *talk*. He could mimic light patterns, whistles, and even simple melodies, but *words*? Even though

Will fully believed that Mike could understand him, he didn't think it was *possible* for Mike to actually speak, was it? It was so far out of the realm of possibility that it sounded insane. It was such a stupid thought to have, no matter how much that whining growl sounded like a 'sorry'.

Will went back to stroking Mike's arm, tracing the pads of his fingers over the pattern of Mike's scales. In the dark, it all blurred together. He never would have thought it would be so elaborate or intricate, but here it was, a painting of living flesh. Almost all the scales were multi hue, even the ones that looked completely black from a cursory glance had shades to them. It was beautiful and it was heartbreaking. Mike shouldn't be here, exposed like this. It wasn't natural and it wasn't right. He was something that no human was ever supposed to lay eyes on, let alone hold captive. What was happening to him was a tragedy so wrong that it made Will want to weep from the injustice of it.

"I'm sorry. I'll talk to them. I'll make sure everything will be alright."

Mike twitched and jerked beneath the restraints, as if he didn't believe Will. Will didn't blame him. Really, what was he, a nothing, a nobody, supposed to do about this? What was he supposed to do about anything?

**

'We want to put you in the water.'

'I'm sorry, what?'

'We want to put you in the tank. In a cage, of course, so you'll be perfectly safe.'

'Are... are you sure that's a good idea? I thought you were just talking about how aggressive and unstable he is.'

'We were, and are, concerned with the aggression. It's at the forefront of our minds at all times I assure you, but we continued to observe him in the hospital tank, continued to monitor your progress with him, and we think this is the next logical step.'

'Really? Aren't you worried he'll attack me again? I mean, he didn't recognize me in the tyvek suit, there's no way he'll know it's me in full scuba gear.'

'We've thought about that, believe me Mr. Byers. We wouldn't ask you to go in if we thought you'd be in any serious danger. To negate the risk, we feel it would be for the best if you donned the suit in full view of the undine. He's an intelligent creature, he should be able to make the connection that it's still you in there, even if you look different. Especially if he can see you change into it.'

'You're not going to dump buckets of chum into the water while I'm in there, are you?' Will asked, half joking. Dr. Frazier didn't smile back.

'He'll be fed well in advance, I promise you that. If he attacks, it won't be from hunger. But again, you'll be perfectly safe in the cage. Just don't reach through the bars,' she added with a grin of her own.

Will stood in the cage, looking at the bars with scrutiny. Dr. Frazier must have been joking about sticking his hands through because even if he wanted to, there was no way in hell he could have stuck much more than a finger or toe through the first layer of the mesh cage, much less far enough out to reach the second set of steel bars. He looked at the technician that had helped him in and taught him to use the diving cylinder. The tech blinked at him and offered a smile.

"We don't want it reaching in anymore than we want you reaching out. Don't worry, it's perfectly safe."

There was that phrase again. 'perfectly safe'. It may have been meant to be reassuring, but the more he heard it, the more nervous he became.

"Has he ever had a cage in the water with him before?" Will asked, seeking extra assurance that everything was under control.

"Sure, empty ones. We tried with a dummy once, like a mannequin, but it didn't fool him. The most he did was circle around and bite the bars now and again."

"He bit the bars?"

“Sure. Wouldn’t you? Just to see? First new thing in the tank in ages, he had to investigate it.”

“Investigate. Sure,” Will agreed, eyes wandering over the bars, trying to see if any looked damaged from Mike’s ‘investigation’.

“You’ll be fine, trust me. Just try not to block the camera, okay?”

Will nodded, trying to at least pretend to be confident. After all, he’d been the one to promise Mike that everything would be okay. If he could keep the researchers interested and convinced that Mike wasn’t inherently too aggressive to handle, he’d be fulfilling at least part of his promise. So even though he felt very much like he might faint, Will stepped into the center of the cage and gave a thumbs up.

Below him, Mike circled, watching the happenings above. He’d greeted Will the same as he always did, with the familiar pattern of his lights and swaying back and forth. Will had waved back, held up the suit to the glass so Mike could get a good look at it, and started pulling it on over his lycra shorts and shirt. Mike watched with what looked like interest as Will plopped to the floor to pull on the borrowed swim shoes, but pulled away, teeth bared when the technician entered with the scuba tank and buoyancy compensator vest. He’d stayed quiet and dark the rest of the time Will geared up, watching from somewhere below. The lack of light and whistles made Will nervous.

He pulled the mouthpiece out and twisted his head to look at the technician.

“Are you sure he knows it’s me?” he called, seeking one last, encouraging bit of assurance.

“He saw you gear up. If he’s as intelligent as the doc seems to think, he should know it’s you, even with all the extra equipment.”

“I don’t think he likes you being here.”

“Yeah well, someone’s gotta put you in and out of the water and tranq it if something goes bad.”

Will looked at him, wide eyed and alarmed.

"I thought you said everything was going to be fine and that this is perfectly safe?"

"It is. Don't worry. This is just a precaution," the tech said, tapping the rifle. "Just don't let him bite you, okay? He's venomous."

"How's he supposed to bite me through the bars?" Will asked, beginning to doubt very much that this was safe at all.

"He's not, don't worry. Just covering all our bases. You ready?"

"Yep, absolutely!" Will squeaked, shoving the mouthpiece back into place before he could change his mind.

He laced his fingers through the mesh of the inner cage to keep his balance when the crank started to lift and move him over the center of the tank. He tried to stay calm, unsure if Mike could smell fear or if that was just a myth people said about predators to make them more frightening. He hoped it wasn't true because his heart was pounding about a mile a minute and he really didn't want it to trigger some kind of predator/prey instinct that could make Mike attack him.

He stumbled when the crank jerked and started to lower him towards the black water. When he was about twenty feet away, he started to second guess his decision to go in the tank. When he was two feet away, he almost pulled the mask off and shouted for the technician to stop and pull him back up. By the time he was knee deep, it was way too late for that and he just squeezed his fingers tighter as the surprisingly warm water lapped up and towards his chest.

When he was fully submerged, feet drifting off the bottom of the cage and his hair floating around his goggles, he had to remind himself how to breathe through the mouthpiece. The bubbles tickled his face when they escaped and floated up and Will used the direction they moved to keep himself oriented. He hoped the footage he got was usable, because to him, everything looked like being dropped straight into an inkwell. He turned, tried to look around, but there was nothing to see but the bars of the cage around him.

'I don't think this is working,' he wanted to say, but there was no way

to talk. He turned again, tried to look down to see if Mike was below him, as Will was used to, but there was no warm, welcoming light.

Something dark and alarmingly big passed beside him, and even though Will knew logically that it was Mike, and even if it wasn't he was perfectly safe in the cage, he jerked away. In the dark, with no glowing lights or glass between them, trapped in a cage and surrounded by water so black that he could barely see directly in front of his face, Will was afraid. He ran his palms across the mesh, feeling it and assuring himself the locks on both sets of bars were secure, and he pushed himself forward.

Mike passed by again, this time pausing to look at the bubbles that rose up from Will's mask, to swim through them, before looping back around to float in front of the cage. Will couldn't see him well in the dark, but he could see those dark eyes examining him, the cogs in his head turning as he tried to decide whether or not it was Will, and whether or not he'd attack anyway. Dr. Frazier said he was territorial. What would he do with someone in the tank, in his actual space instead of just observing from outside of it?

When the gentle glow finally started, Will breathed a sigh of relief. It wasn't the frantic, angry flashing that it had been when Will was throwing the dismembered fish into the water. It was the soft, slow fade in and out that made Will want to get closer to it, just for a better look. Will pressed his hands against the mesh, spread his fingers wide, and Mike looked down at them. After a moment, he slipped his long, slender arm through the wide bars of the repurposed shark cage and pressed the tips of his claws through the mesh below, unable to do more thanks to the webbing between his fingers.

Will traced the pad of his thumb across one of the claws, testing the feel of it. It was sharp and Will was certain if he pressed harder, he would have bled. He let his body float up until he was horizontal in the cage, his belly floating a few feet above the bottom. Mike flared the spines around his face, framing it in what must have looked similar to Will's hair floating around his own.

He wished he could talk, that he could tell Mike everything was going to be fine, but with the mouthpiece in, he couldn't do much of anything other than breathe. Mike blinked and opened his mouth.

Instead of a whistle or a growl, a high, soft sound came out and echoed around the water. Will listened to it with interest, but it was indecipherable, as unknowable as a whale's song. Whatever it was, it was pretty, and Will hoped the recording would do it justice.

Mike made the noise again, in a pattern close to a melody, and his illumination seemed to match the sound. Will watched, wondering if there was any way for him to respond. He tried changing the pattern of his breathing, tried to manipulate the way the bubbles escaped his mask, and Mike watched that in return. After a moment, Mike swam away, up towards the surface of the water. Will watched him go, confused, but when he dove back down, Will understood.

Mike exhaled through his nose, sending bubbles spewing from it in the same pattern Will had tried to create with his own breathing. Will leaned back, tilted his head up, and exhaled. The bubbles floated away. Mike watched while Will did it again before swimming up and through them. It was cute, the way he wove in and out of them, almost like he was playing with them. Will did it again and watched as Mike continued the motion of weaving in and out.

He could have done it for hours, but something was bothering him. Yes, this was interesting behavior and yes, it was probably invaluable to the researchers, but wasn't it a waste of time? How often would Will get the chance to be in the water with an undine? With Mike? Will rolled over onto his back to float and watch Mike weave around the water, just admiring the shape and beauty of him.

Mike rolled as well, his fins flowing around him like a dancer's veils. Mike did a graceful flip and Will tried his best to imitate it. It was difficult in the cage with the oxygen tank on his back, and when Mike exposed his teeth, it looked almost like a smile. Will would have returned it if he'd been able. All he could do was float and watch.

He wasn't sure how long he spent in the water, rolling and twisting to imitate Mike's movements, and watching the undine weave around and circle him.

When the cage moved, Will looked up at the chain, then down at his tank indicator. The oxygen was running low, he'd have to be pulled out soon. Mike saw the cage move too, saw the chain that had tugged

on it, and he swam over, circling it. When it was pulled again, Mike bared his teeth in what was clearly *not* a smile. Then he was gone, swimming up towards where the crank was attached.

Will lanced his fingers around the mesh around him and kicked it, trying to warn Mike to stop, but the undine was already gnawing on the chain, biting and tearing at it with claws and teeth. His light pattern was back to that quick, headache inducing strobe it had been when he had been angry and trying to attack Will on the catwalk.

Will kicked the cage again, trying to get his attention. Mike ignored him, still biting the chain with ferocity. Will didn't know if Mike would be able to damage the chain or if he'd simply break his teeth on it. Neither option was good, and the cage was starting to rise towards the surface of the water. If Mike didn't move, if he clung to it, would he be dragged out too? Will peddled kicked the cage as hard as was possible and exhaled as deeply as he was able, sending as many bubbles up as he could manage. Mike finally looked down at him, black eyes focused. Will pressed his hands to the roof of the cage and pointed up to the surface. He pointed at the tank on his back and exhaled again and motioned to the bubbles before motioning back to the tank. If Mike broke the chain, there was no way for Will to unlock the cages and get to the surface. He might drown if Mike didn't let him go back up. Or the technician might just decide to take a shot at him and stop the danger right there.

To his relief, Mike released the chain and swam up. His relief died when the undine swam back down, cheeks puffed out and filled with air which he tried to blow in Will's direction, as if that would help. Will shook his head and pointed back up to the surface. Mike's eyes followed and though he didn't seem happy about it, he didn't attack the chain again. Instead, he just circled around it, even breaking the surface of the water as the cage was pulled free and Will popped his head out of the water.

As fast as he could, Will pulled the mouthpiece and the goggles off, dislodging the camera and its view as he did. He looked across the water to where Mike was circling, and rapped his knuckles on the inner cage.

"Hey, Mike. Mike, settle down. It's okay. I'm okay," he called. "I'm

not leaving, I'll be right here."

Mike made that shrill, half growl, half whine, and bumped his tail against the bars.

"Will."

Will froze. No way had he imagined that.

Quite suddenly and without warning, Mike flared his spines, reared back, and spit. Will jerked back as the bitter, hot liquid hit his face, his eyes, and his open, gaping mouth.

He was so distracted by trying to wipe the stuff off his face that Will fell flat on his ass, knocked off balance by the sudden tilting of the cage as the crane pulled him up and to the side. Will rolled onto his knees and looked down into the water where Mike looked back, unblinking, and not saying a word.

Notes for the Chapter:

Ope, well, part two of three is done. I really hope you enjoyed this chapter and want to see where the story goes. I'm about halfway done with the final installment, and I hope you find the conclusion to be satisfying.

As always, comments and kudos are appreciated. I read every comment and always try to respond. I love talking to all of you and knowing what you enjoyed and what you think needs work.

Be well and take care of yourselves.

3. Chapter 3

Summary for the Chapter:

Will has an accident that changes his life.

Notes for the Chapter:

CW: Mild violence, anxiety, cruelty, and injury

Will felt his leg bounce and though it bothered him, he had no way to stop it. He sat, wringing his hands as he waited for Dr. Frazier to acknowledge him. Instead of doing that, she looked over her notes, her glasses precariously balanced on the tip of her nose while she read. Her French tipped nails ran across the pages, pausing only when something seemed to catch her attention, and she flicked her wrist in what looked like a harsh, jagged motion as she made a notation with the pen she held. Will wondered what her signature looked like. He doubted very much that it would have long, sweeping hoops and curves to it. It probably looked just as angry and harsh as the expression she wore. When she finally deigned to look at him, Will felt himself freeze.

‘You say it spoke?’

‘Yes, Ma’am.’

‘In English?’

‘Yes, Ma’am,’ he said, wilting a little under the weight of her incredulous gaze.

‘And what did he say?’

‘Just my name, Ma’am,’ Will whispered, rubbing his eyes before looking down to his hands. There was a stain, just there, on his knuckles. It looked like he’d smeared blue watercolor paint on himself, and he quickly rubbed it off with his thumb. He shoved his hands between his thighs and pressed them closed, trying to force them to be still. Dr. Frazier dropped the folder on the table with a thump that made Will twitch and she leaned back in her chair.

'That is a fascinating claim, Mr. Byers, but I'm afraid it's quite impossible. It cannot speak, at least, not in the way you seem to be implying. He may be able to mimic simple sounds, like a parrot, but he cannot communicate the way you and I can. He may be a sophisticated one, but the undine is an animal, no matter how human he may look. You'd do well not to forget that.'

'Yes, Ma'am,' he whispered, feeling his shoulders hunch around himself as a shield.

'Though I have to say, I'm quite pleased that my assertion about his attachment to you is proving to be correct. The interactions captured on the footage taken from the tank were intriguing.'

'Ma'am?'

'His light pattern, the flaring of his spine are all clear indicators of mating behavior rather than luring prey or guarding territory. To be honest, we weren't sure if you being in the tank would cause it to become aggressive or amorous. I'm pleased to see that he was more inclined towards affection.'

Will blinked and rubbed his eyes again. Why did she insist on keeping the lights so damn bright in here? It hurt his head and made his vision blur uncomfortably. Even her voice was grating and too loud.

'Ma'am?' he asked again, finding that he was having difficulty concentrating.

'It's thrilling, actually. We've only read about this behavior or seen video evidence of it from our sister centers with their own specimens.'

'There's... more of them?' Will asked, shocked. Why didn't he know about this? Why wasn't it all over the news?

'Of course there are,' Dr. Frazier said with a chuckle. 'There are more creatures on this earth and in its seas than you could imagine.'

'Do you think he's lonely?' Will asked suddenly. 'Being the only one here, I mean? If there are more, maybe you could, I don't know, find him a tankmate?'

Dr. Frazier glanced up and frowned.

'We've explored that option, Mr. Byers. All the expenses of travel and transport, all the time and planning, but every time we've tried the introductions with the undines in tanks near each other have been horribly unsuccessful. I can't imagine that we'd have anything less than a bloodbath on our hands if they were to actually be housed together. We have a theory that it's because the rest were created in captivity while this one was harvested in the wild. I don't think they can communicate with each other. You know how whales and dolphins of certain regions have different dialects and pitch to their calls? Well, this undine seems to be speaking an entirely different language than his captive born kin. He becomes quite aggressive when near them. We think it's best for him to be kept isolated, so he doesn't kill off any more of an already endangered species.'

He's not aggressive towards me. Maybe you're just doing something wrong.

'What about the rest? The ones at the other research centers. Are they aggressive? Is it dangerous to have them near each other?'

'Not at all. They seem to enjoy schooling and having family units.'

'But not Mike?'

'No. Not that one.'

Will tried not to forget what Dr. Frazier had told him, but it was difficult when he was watching Mike through the glass, watching him swim and twist himself into the patterns Will drew in the air with his fingers. So far they'd managed a circle, a star, and a heart. Will sat, legs crossed while he watched the glass, and glanced up to the cameras. Dr. Frazier wasn't here, not tonight. She had a meeting in the morning and would watch the tapes later. Will looked back to the glass, where Mike was swimming back and forth, his soft light glowing.

It looked different tonight, dimmer maybe. He swam more slowly, as if the twists and rolls were difficult or painful in some way. To be

honest, Mike had looked off for a few days. His gills looked inflamed, his wide, black eyes a little sunken. To Will, he looked sick.

Even his dark, shining scales looked faded, more grey than black. Will pressed a hand to the glass, wishing he could touch the scales, just to see if they felt any different than they had last time, but he couldn't. He'd probably never touch Mike again. The undine hovered, pressing his own webbed appendage to the glass and it dwarfed Will's, making his hand look like that of a child's. Behind the glass, Will could hear that soft, sad sound Mike sometimes made. It was the same one that at a higher volume might have been the shriek he'd heard the first night.

"Are you okay?" Will asked, wondering if Mike could hear him through the glass. He always seemed more responsive when Will was above, on the catwalk, where Mike could poke his head up above the water.

The long, tapered ears swiveled and Will heard that soft, mournful sound again.

"I wish I knew how to help you," he said, feeling more useless than ever. Because he *was* useless when it came to this. There was nothing he could do other than sit and watch Mike swim back and forth in a space far too small for a creature of his size and majesty. Even as sickly as he looked, Mike was still the most mesmerizing thing Will had ever had the privilege of laying eyes on. He wanted nothing more than to stay and watch for hours. He'd even considered coming in on his days off just to fulfill the need, but when he tried, he was turned away.

They'd only let Will back in the water with him twice since the initial cage dive. Will, feeling brave for once in his life, had asked to be allowed in without the cage and practically been laughed out the door. That was too dangerous; the undine would tear him apart.

But would he? If he was as lonely as Will thought he must be, and if he really was as 'affectionate' towards Will as Dr. Frazier seemed to think he was, why would he attack? Still, no one seemed to think it was a good idea, and Will never pushed the issue. He looked up, watching Mike float around while his soft, pale light faded and

brightened.

So Will took what he could get, even if it was just table scraps and he a dog, begging for more.

"They don't think you can understand me, did you know that?" he asked, scooting closer to the glass. "I don't know what makes them think that. Maybe if you were a little friendlier," he scolded with a half smile on his face, "they'd take me more seriously. Can't you at least try? You know, balance a ball on your nose like a seal or clap your hands to show excitement or something?"

Mike gave Will what he assumed was a frown, as if the idea of performing like a trained monkey was too demeaning to be considered and frankly, Will didn't disagree. Will glanced at the camera again before pushing himself I steadily to his feet. He didn't have nearly the trouble he used to walking up the stairs to the platforms above, but with as uncoordinated as he was, Will wouldn't have said it was easy. At least he wasn't out of breath and panting when he reached the top anymore. He ran his fingers over the railing, no longer needing it to keep his balance, but enjoying the feel and familiarity of it anyway. Will could see just fine in the dark now, having spent months in it.

He didn't mind the suffocating blackness of the room either. It used to bother him, but now Will found himself more bothered by what he'd thought were migraine auras until no headaches ever came. Still, the light irritated him and made his vision blur, so walking through the deep sea building was something of a relief these days. Will sat, dangling his feet from the catwalk as he rested his elbows on the bars of the rails. Beneath him, Mike circled, dorsal fin breaking the water and leaving gentle ripples in its wake.

Will pressed his forehead to the bar and, distantly, heard the chain that held the access gate locked near his ear, rattling like fairy bells. He ran his nails across his flaking, dry skin and sighed. He really needed to get to a doctor for the hives or eczema or whatever it was that he was beginning to develop; the drug store lotions just weren't cutting it anymore. He just never found the time, even with the insurance. He was too conditioned to avoiding staking up any more bills, and consequently the doctors who handed them out, to go to

one about a run of the mill case of dermatitis. He'd never had skin problems before (other than the occasional acne but that was perfectly normal). He was beginning to think something in the water was irritating to his skin, even if he wore the full wetsuit when he was allowed in. From somewhere below, he heard the sweet sound of Mike's whistles and he closed his eyes to listen.

Because the more Mike practiced it, the sweeter it sounded. Maybe he really was a Siren, and Will was being lulled away to a state of entrancement after all. Will sighed again and let his legs swing in time to the melody Mike created. He felt heavy and tired, more tired than he had in ages. He might have fallen asleep if it wasn't for the nagging feeling that if he did, he wouldn't wake again.

He snapped his eyes open, alarmed by the thought, and gripped the rail. He pushed against it, used it for support to pull his legs free and push himself to his feet. He let it take all his weight while he struggled to stand, and when he did, he found himself suddenly without support at all.

Will heard himself make a sound, maybe to cry out, as he toppled head first off the platform and towards the water.

But the gate's locked, he thought in protest, even as he fell. *Isn't it?*

He took a breath on instinct, with no idea of when he'd hit the water, and tried to hold onto it even when his back struck the surface and tried to force it from his lungs. At first, he couldn't move from the shock at all, and he did nothing but float, stunned, as little bubbles escaped from his nose and between his lips. He blinked, fully expecting the salt of the water to sting his eyes, but it didn't.

When he came to his senses, Will thrashed his limbs in an attempt to right himself and swim up. The only indication he had that he was moving in the right direction was by how his shoes and jeans tried to weigh him down in the wrong one.

He hadn't been lying during his training when he said he was a good swimmer. He'd grown up swimming in the quarry near his home and spent three summers as a lifeguard at the Hawkins Community Pool, but that had been in proper attire, and not after a forty foot fall to

land flat on his back.

Because that certainly complicated things, and by a *lot*. He felt disoriented, lungs aflame, and numb from the impact. At least he'd hit the water with his back instead of his head. At least he wouldn't have a concussion.

He tried to kick, to push himself towards where he thought the surface was, but with his clothes and shoes, he barely cut the water fast enough to move even a few inches, let alone the several feet he needed to go to reach the surface. He felt like he was taking one step forward and three steps back. Frustrated and with the beginning tingles of fear nipping at the edge of his mind, he drew his lips back in a grimace.

Will shuddered but tried not to panic when Mike's soft blue light and outlandishly large figure approached from somewhere to his left.

He's not going to hurt you he's not going to hurt you he's not going to hurt you.

Will believed that, he really did. To an extent. He *didn't* think Mike would hurt him *on purpose*. That didn't mean he wouldn't by mistake.

Will had read articles about animal handlers being mauled by their charges before. Chimpanzees, tigers, bears, whales, even dolphins could turn on people familiar and seriously injure or kill them. Mike was a fair amount bigger than a dolphin, and his teeth and claws had always been imposing. Will tried not to look over at him, tried to just concentrate on propelling himself up and towards where he needed to be, but it was a challenge. That light was nothing if not distracting.

He furrowed his brow in concentration while Mike circled so close that he ran the length of his body across Will's kicking legs. Will's lungs burned and his chest hurt, especially when he felt something similar to hands, though much sharper, grip him around the waist and tighten. They pierced his clothes, sunk past his skin into the meat of his flesh, and Will thought for sure he was about to be disemboweled. Before he could react, even to struggle, he was thrust up, through the water so quickly it was unnerving. His head broke the surface and Will gasped, grateful beyond measure to have access

to air again.

The claws in his belly fell away, leaving him bleeding like a stuck pig, but mercifully alive instead of dead and sunken at the bottom of the tank. He struggled to catch his breath as he twisted, trying to acclimatize himself to where he was and where Mike was in relation to him. It wasn't hard; the undine was not subtle.

Mike breached the water, exposed his head and shoulders to look Will over before lowering again. Will kept his eyes trained, tried to keep himself from thrashing too wildly in case it provoked the undine's prey drive. Mixed with the blood that leaked from the holes in him, Will wouldn't have been shocked if Mike's instincts took over and he attacked, but Will tried to keep him from having reason to. Beneath the surface, Mike rolled onto his back and released the air he'd collected as little bubbles from his nose.

Will stared, taken off guard, before laughing as the undine broke the surface of the water again.

"Y- yeah. Air. Thanks," he said, amazed that he'd managed to string together something even resembling a coherent sentence given the circumstances. Mike surged forward, making Will shrink away and withdraw, but stopped when the undine halted the movement just inches away from his face.

"Air."

"Y- y- y-" Will stuttered, unable to perform the trick of actually speaking for a second time. He felt like he might be sick.

Mike's ears twitched, as if he was trying to decide what to make of Will's jumbled attempt at speech, and whistled instead. Will pursed his lips in an attempt to return the sound but barely more than a weak, airy breath came out. Will kept his legs pumping, treading water to keep his head up and clear of the dark surface while the pain in his ribs and abdomen flared. He winced and pressed a hand to one of the open, stinging wounds, and grit his teeth. With every beat of his heart, accelerated by the exertion of keeping himself afloat and his elevated heart rate, his blood flowed out.

He'd wanted to be in the water with Mike, yes, but not like this: not when he was wounded with no conceivable way out. Will twisted and thrust himself in the direction of the nearest wall. Mike followed next to him, observing his movements with curious, dark eyes, only occasionally bumping into him and knocking him off course. It never seemed intentional or aggressive; if anything, it seemed almost accidental, as if Mike had forgotten what it was like to swim with another creature, or perhaps didn't realize how much larger he was in both length and bulk when compared to the human he suddenly shared the tank with.

When he reached the glass, Will pressed his hands to it and looked up. It was at least thirty feet high if not more, and the catwalk another ten or so feet above that. Will kicked hard, some irrational, absolutely insane part of him trying to see how high he could reach while knowing full well he didn't have a chance in hell of making it to the top. Mike bumped into him again more roughly, pushing him away from the glass in a way that felt like it was by design.

"Mike, stop," Will whispered, having trouble speaking with how jittery he was, how drained and nauseated he felt. "I need to get out."

Mike bumped against him again in what Will assumed was protest and popped his head out of the water. He drew his lips back in a hiss and hooked his clawed hands around Will's shirt and yanked, ripping it as he pulled. Will tried not to fight it, tried not to give Mike any reason to dig his claws in any deeper or into his flesh again and cause any more injury. When Mike pulled down again, Will felt himself submerge for a moment, and panicked. He kicked out and gripped Mike's wide, scaled shoulder as leverage to keep his head above the water while his other hand reached for the glass again.

"Stop! I have to breathe," he gasped, digging his own nails into the thick, almost carapace-like portion of the undine's body, just beneath the spines around his throat. Mike hissed again and Will squeezed harder, trying his best to keep his chin above the churning water.

"Breathe," Mike growled in return as he shoved one large, webbed hand under Will's shirt to press against the bare wounds on his ribs.

Will shook his head frantically, sure that Mike could yank him down

with almost no effort if he wanted.

"I can't breathe through that," he exclaimed, voice a little high as he swallowed a mouthful of warm, salty water. "Those aren't gills," he tried to explain, hoping that Mike understood him well enough to understand *that*. "Please don't pull me under."

Mike paused, but didn't release him. Behind his black, turntable eyes, the cogs were moving again, like they had when he'd watched Will put on the scuba suit and oxygen tank. He was trying to puzzle something out. After a moment, he flicked his tail to raise himself, and consequently Will (who was still clinging to his shoulder and pawing at the glass) up and further out of the water. Will took a moment to count his blessings before Mike's hand on his ribs spread out again, touching the wounds with far more delicacy than he had when he'd dragged Will to the surface of the tank. He took care to keep his claws as light as a feather as he examined the punctures, and Will almost swallowed water again when he felt it tickle.

"Please don't do that," he squeaked, wriggling away reflexively, withdrawing his hand on the undine's shoulder.

"Hurt?" Mike asked, withdrawing his hand.

"No. Well, a little," Will admitted, still looking around for a way out. He jerked back, confused when Mike dipped below the water and ran his tongue over the open and bleeding wound. Will kicked and tried to paddle away but only bumped into the glass when he felt the tongue trail over him again.

He held his breath, worried that even the movement of his breathing would entice Mike to bite down and take an even larger chunk out of him. But the undine did nothing violent and showed no interest in tearing him apart. He licked the torn flesh one more time before re-emerging from the water and returning to where he'd been, just watching Will try to stay afloat.

"Hurt," he rasped, confirming for himself what Will had already told him.

"Yeah."

And tired.

Because it was nearly three am and Will's clothes were doing him no favors as far as conserving his energy. Paired with the open wounds and blood loss, Will was downright exhausted, and despite his best efforts, began to have trouble keeping his chin above the water. Mike watched for a moment, mimicking the movement of Will sinking low before kicking hard and pushing himself up again. Even using Mike's shoulder for balance was starting to take its toll and the more time passed, the more the quake in his limbs began to grow. He needed a way out, and soon.

But the glass was perfectly smooth, with no indentations for handles, even if Will had had the strength to pull himself out. He craned his neck, trying to locate the nearest camera. Someone had to have seen him fall. Even without Dr. Frazier watching in real time, *someone* had to be checking now and again. A security guard, a technician, a lab assistant, *someone*. And there was a camera, but it couldn't see him from here. He had to get across the tank and draw attention somehow.

Slowly, he pushed away from the glass and started trying to swim. It was hard work, and Mike followed beneath him, keeping an eye on what must have been an amusingly bad attempt at swimming when compared to his own, graceful movements. Frustrated with the ball and chain his shoes had become, Will kicked them along with his socks off. Mike dove beneath the water and Will felt the undine's hands on him, or more specifically, on his feet, as if Mike was examining them. A clawed hand trailed up his ankle, under the hem of his pant leg and pushed it back, exposing the skin underneath. Will tried to be still so he didn't cut himself on Mike's claws, but it was hard when he needed to tread water to stay afloat. It remind Will of when he'd touched Mike in the holding tank, when he'd been too tempted to know what the scales felt like to *not* touch them himself, and he realized with a start that he may very well have been the first person Mike had ever had an opportunity to inspect and touch as well.

When Mike was done with his apparent examination of Will, he returned to the surface to watch him swim. It was easier to swim without the shoes, and even as slow and graceless as he was, Will

made it to the other side. He pressed one hand against the glass and started waving the other as wildly as he could in what he hoped was in full view of the camera.

“Hey! Hey! Can anyone hear me? Get me out!”

Somewhere near him, Mike slapped his tail against the water, spraying Will’s face with droplets and making him shake his head to clear his vision.

“I’m sorry,” Will whispered. “I have to get their attention,” he tried to explain. “I need help.”

I don’t want to drown.

Mike splashed again, missing Will this time. He flared his lights bright and for a second, Will didn’t move. Was that the attack pattern? Will couldn’t tell, but he halted his attempts to call for help, just in case. Mike splashed again before diving down. Will watched him go, heart pounding like a drum. It was so loud he was surprised it didn’t shake the glass around him. Then Mike broke the water and launched himself into the air, high above Will’s head, his body flickering like a disco ball. Mike hit the water again, parted it easily with his hands, and continued down before turning to take another leap. He was trying to help.

Will pressed himself to the glass, rested his forehead upon it to keep himself balanced while he concentrated on the rhythm of his kicks. By the third jump, Will was sure someone must have seen it. By the fifth, Mike had slowed, like he was getting tired too.

Will felt himself dip, his nose going beneath the water for a moment and reinvigorating his attempts to stay up. It wasn’t working. He closed his eyes and tried to drown out everything else around him. When his nose went under for a second time, he felt the first sting of tears in his eyes. If someone didn’t get there and soon, he wasn’t going to get out at all.

The touch of scales against his side made him twitch. The feel of a clawed hand against his back made him twist to look. Mike was glowing gently, his face a few inches below Will’s shoulder, barely

above the water at all. Will forced a smile, trying out the ‘fake it till you make it’ approach to the growing anxiety that the security guard was on an exceptionally long smoke break, or that the cameras were turned off for some inexplicable reason, and he really was going to drown in here.

“I’m okay,” he whispered when Mike whistled at him and bumped his legs again. “Someone’s coming to get me. You did a really great job, I’m sure they saw it and are going to be here soon.”

He didn’t convince himself, but he certainly hoped it convinced Mike who kept up the whistling despite Will’s assurances. Will pressed his forehead to the glass again, his breath making it steam around him despite the warmth of the water. He just had to keep kicking, no matter how tired he was getting. When his legs started to feel like jello, he tried to pull himself up with whatever leverage he could manage with the admittedly weak grip he had on the glass. Behind him, Mike whistled, but it sounded muffled and distant.

“I’m okay. I’m okay,” he whispered. “I just have to hold on.”

A clawed hand pawed at his own, trying and succeeding in prying it from the glass. Will tried to jerk it away, but Mike didn’t let go. Will blinked and looked at him in confusion. Mike had rolled onto his back and spread his pectoral fins wide like some great, aquatic flying squirrel. He was floating, belly up, like a raft.

“Hold on,” Mike ordered in a deep, rasping growl.

Will hesitated, but seeing no better options, let himself release his already weak hold on the glass. With Mike’s assistance, and with a little more bloodshed thanks to the claws, Will found himself with his cheek and chest pressed to Mike’s own wide, strong torso while his legs dangled uselessly in the water.

Was this okay? Wouldn’t his added weight drag Mike down too?

But it didn’t seem to as Mike drifted back and forth across the surface of the tank, keeping Will afloat and safe enough for the time being. Beneath his cheek, Will felt the warmth of Mike’s photophores as he brightened and faded, still trying to get whatever attention he could

from whoever must have seen the cameras by now.

When his hands ran up from where they had rested on Mike's chest to touch the spines around his face, Will wasn't sure why he did it. They twitched beneath his fingers and Will withdrew, only pausing when two of Mike's own long, impossibly sharp claws touched his own hair just as experimentally. The juxtaposition of how roughly the undine had handled him before, when he'd impaled Will with his claws to how softly he touched now made Will wonder when the last time Mike had touched anyone was. None of it seemed malicious or intentionally harmful; it seemed more as though he simply didn't know *how* to touch, especially something as delicate as a human.

The fact that he had realized he'd injured Will with his first touch, and cared enough to make adjustments at all should have been all the proof Dr. Frazier needed to take Will seriously about how intelligent he thought Mike actually was. Speech aside, *empathy* and critical thinking skills, being able to not only understand that Will needed to stay above the water's surface to live despite the fact that Mike himself could breathe in either environment, but actually *helping* him do it should be more than sufficient evidence of intelligence higher than that of a mere animal.

Will felt Mike shift before he heard the first footsteps above. He raised his head, tried to crane his neck to see what was happening and who had finally come to collect him, but Mike twisted, knocking Will from off his chest and dug his claws into Will's arms so hard he punctured them again. Will couldn't help the cry of pain, but instantly regretted it when he heard guns, *multiple* gun cocking.

"Wait," he whimpered. "I'm okay!"

It didn't matter. Will saw the light shine down and the dart strike Mike in the flank moments before he heard the undine snarl and felt the teeth latch on and dig into his shoulder. Will cried out again and started flailing, trying to free himself from the teeth in his flesh as he felt what seemed to him to be dozens of inoculations pumped into his arm in white hot, painful ribbons of venom.

He bit me, Will thought vaguely as the undine detached, blessedly without taking a chunk of Will with him.

Mike shoved him away and dove, fleeing the shooters as one rappelled down from the catwalk, secured by a rope and safety vest. Will looked up as the woman who'd been sent to retrieve him tossed a torpedo buoy his direction and multiple searchlights pointed in his direction all at once. Will tried to block the light with his good arm while he reached for the buoy with his injured one.

"You okay?" the woman asked, swimming in his direction.

"He... he bit me," Will said, stupidly instead of answering the question.

The woman nodded as she worked to strap the rescue harness around him.

"We've got you, Mr. Byers. We'll get you medical treatment."

Will nodded as he felt the last buckle click into place. He was dragged out of the water like a cheaply made toy from a claw machine. Will hoped the vest was more secure than any of the claws he'd ever encountered in an arcade, because those were questionable at best and rigged to fail at worst. He really didn't want to fall another forty feet; not when whatever venom Mike had injected him with was making his head spin and his arm go numb.

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Will spent the next two days in what he could only imagine was an isolation room at a hospital, though he saw no doctors or nurses in uniform. He drifted in and out of consciousness, plagued by fevers, sweats, chills, and thirst. Once or twice he almost pulled the IV out of his arm with how ferociously he scratched at his dry, flaking skin, making himself bleed. They strapped him down when wrapping his hands in gauze did nothing to stop his attempts to scratch.

The place Mike bit him was red, inflamed, and felt like it was infected. It throbbed and flaked so badly he even found himself crying from the frustration of not being able to scratch it. Whoever the faceless nurses were underneath their hazmat suits, they were kind enough to keep the lights out and replace the damp, wet towels they'd coated his body with to fight the fever.

Everything hurt, but more than the pain, Will hated the unanswered questions. Was Mike dead? Did they euthanize him because of the ‘attack’? Will didn’t know and he had no idea who he could even ask. His NDA was a very effective gag order.

He didn’t even fight it when he was taken from the room and put in a hydrotherapy tub and covered with something akin to a canvas tarp. The continuous bath with the water kept just below his fevered body temperature helped soothe the ache in his muscles and bones. And more often than not, Will found himself doing nothing but sleep while the days flew by. Once, he woke up with what felt like a tumor or growth on his neck, but had no way of reaching up and touching it to confirm what it was with the way his hands were bound and wrapped beneath the tarp. He dreamed his teeth were falling out, over and over. He’d had the dream before and he’d read it was a common anxiety dream. When he woke, he ran his tongue across them, just to confirm they were all still there. He cut his tongue on them and, assuming he was still dreaming, fell back to sleep.

The first time he saw Dr. Frazier, he almost cried again.

‘Hello, Mr. Byers. How are you feeling?’

He tried to speak, even just to tell her to shut up because of how shrill and loud her voice sounded, but he couldn’t. He could barely move, let alone answer any questions.

‘I was terribly sorry to hear about your accident. We are just horrified this happened to you.’

Was she? Then why did she have that stupid, half hidden grin on her face?

He licked his lips and tried to turn to look at her more clearly, but found himself trapped beneath the canvas, arms and torso strapped down as well as the rest of him. When had they done that?

‘I want you to know that you’ll be provided the best care available. You don’t need to worry about anything, Mr. Byers. Our lawyers are taking care of it and the contract you signed ensures your family will be well compensated for this tragic loss.’

What? What ‘tragic loss’? Was Will going to die?

He thrashed again, tried to demonstrate that he was still strong, that he was still fighting and there was no reason for her to give up on him just yet, but he could do little other than shake his head from side to side. A low, chest rumbling growl emitted from his mouth as he curled his lips back in a snarl instead of the verbal protest he’d intended. Dr. Frazier tsked at him and crossed one leg over the other.

‘Now now, none of that please. You’re the three hundredth twenty seventh person infected with venom from this species, we have a pretty solid grip on what we’re doing by now. We’re going to take care of you, Mr. Byers. You’ll be moved to the hospital tank this afternoon and, God willing, the habitat tank by the end of the week.’

Will stared at her in the dark, not understanding what she was trying to say. He strained against the bindings, gnashed his teeth in confusion and anger, and when he saw a pale, blue light flare next to his head, froze. He strained, tried to see where the light was coming from, and was horrified to realize it was coming from him.

*He did scream then, or shriek, as it were. The sound was **loud**, far louder than he’d meant it to be, and it filled the rooms or what seemed like hours before dying away. Dr. Frazier narrowed her eyes in displeasure and stood.*

*‘Now you listen to me, Mr. Byers. I don’t know if you can still understand me or if the toxin has already altered your mind beyond the point of comprehension, but mark my words, if you do that again, I **will** have you muzzled. Is that clear?’*

*What the fuck was she talking about? What about **any** of this should be clear? Hospital tank? **What the fuck was she talking about?** Will threw his head back and screamed again.*

This was a nightmare: a horrible, horrible nightmare. It was worse than any dream about reading a book report naked or having all his teeth fall out like he’d been chewing acid tablets. He was trapped and in pain and he didn’t understand what she was trying to say. He screamed again, so loud and hard he felt the tub he was trapped in shake with it.

Then he felt a sharp, stabbing pain in his neck, and then very, very tired.

**

Will pressed his hands to the glass, stretched out his fingers, and tried to fight back the absolute panic that tried to bubble up and escape him as yet another, ear shattering shriek. Between them was a thin, pale membrane: interdigital webbing. His nails had grown into hooks, horrifically sharp and long. He cut himself more than once when he tried to use his hands to examine himself, nearly tore an entire strip of scales off in his frenzy as he twisted and turned, trying to make any kind of sense of what had happened. He ran his clawed hands over his head, but his hair was gone. In its place was a flimsy, sharp row of spines. Will threw himself back and forth in the tank, slammed his shoulders, his... his *tail* against the glass so hard they left bruises.

The worst part, worse even than being trapped in a cage, in the *wrong body*, while no one spoke to him or even listened when he tried to call out, was the light. Because he couldn't control that, no matter how hard he tried. It blinked and flared without his consent, making his heart race and head spin. There was nowhere to hide here, not even an artificial cave or coral. There wasn't even sand to bury himself in, not here, not where they needed to observe him and tranquilize him to take blood and tissue samples.

So he swam in endless circles. He slammed himself against the glass in a futile attempt to break it, and he clawed at the mesh wire above the tank to tear it open. He screamed, over and over until his throat hurt and his gills were red and inflamed. When he couldn't scream anymore, he cried. Because even if no one would talk to *him*, and even if he couldn't force his throat and tongue to form the words he wanted to say, he could still hear the scientists talk to *each other*.

His family thought he was dead. The research facility had settled his wrongful death case out of court and no one was looking for him. They'd provided some freakish, unnaturally realistic corpse to his mother for her to bury.

"He hasn't stopped screaming in days. Are you sure it's safe to move him to the habitat tank? Won't that provoke the other subject?"

"He's not injured, there's no reason to continue the isolation. Besides, the other one is what infected him in the first place."

"Still, he's taking this really badly. None of the other subjects reacted this way."

"The others were volunteers."

"Then why didn't Frazier just give him the antitoxin? It's not like there haven't been accidental exposures before."

"Apparently he'd been exposed before the bite. Probably had symptoms before the actual attack. The antitoxin doesn't do shit after twelve hours. Poor bastard was gonna turn either way, the bite just sped things up."

"Even so, are you sure it's safe to introduce him to the habitat tank? Shouldn't we just ship him to a center better equipped to handle multiples? At least none of them have any aggression issues."

"Can't. Frazier's got her mind made up on this. He's being transferred tomorrow. If the prime subject kills him, at least she already has her ass covered with the family. She wants to conduct this experiment one way or another. Trust me when I say she doesn't care what your or my concerns might be. It's all about the research for her."

Will curled around himself and covered his head, his light flickering so fast he worried he was going to pass out from how nauseated he was making himself. They made him a monster, told his family he was dead, and now they were going to throw him into a tank where Mike would more than likely tear him to pieces. Mike hadn't been able to recognize him in a tyvek suit; there was no way he'd recognize him as he was now, when he wasn't even *human*.

He curled so close around himself that his fluke wrapped all the way around and covered his face, offering him the only reprieve he had from prying eyes and endless observation. Will looked at it, ran his claws across it, examining it. It was thin and translucent near the tips, and as fragile as he'd imagined Mike's to be. Will pierced it once by accident and hadn't wanted to touch it since. Even in the dark, his uncontrollable luminations let him see it so clearly that not even he

could deny it was a real, physical thing and not something his fever-addled mind had made up.

His coloration was different from Mike's, though similar. He was covered in black, wide scales trimmed with more blue than violet, and his chest and underbelly were covered in a blue so dark it may as well have been black as well. Will closed his eyes but couldn't stop his ears from rotating around to listen to what was going on around him. Will wanted to press his palms to them, to force the sound out, but even if he did, he couldn't stop what was picked up by them. It was a torture, and probably the last thing he'd ever experience. Tomorrow he was going to be transferred, and likely, killed.

**

Will hissed and clawed at the wires of the diving cage he'd been shoved into. The cage was latched shut with a pull pin and no matter how hard he clawed at it, Will couldn't seem to bend the wires enough to fit his hand through, let alone reach high enough to pull the pin and free himself. Above him, he watched the crank move and he flopped onto his side, having lost his grip on the wire, and felt himself begin to bleed from where he'd ripped off a handful of scales in his struggle. He tried to claw his way back up, tried to reach the ceiling of the cage but despite his new, heavily muscled appendage, he couldn't climb or hope to reach it. He was being dropped into the water and there was nothing he could do.

When the cage hit the water, Will twisted and coiled tight near the bottom. His eyes darted around as he flared, his luciferin and photophores going berserk without his consent. Dr. Frazier knew Mike and the other undines couldn't communicate with each other, she knew Mike had already attacked Will, more than once now. She'd sent him here to die just so she had something interesting to make notes on. Will tried not to panic as he searched the water, but he felt himself growl and flare over and over anyway. As it turned out, Will didn't need Mike to flare in return to let him know where the undine was; Will could see him just fine with his new eyes.

Mike was circling beneath the cage, very nearly at the bottom of the tank as he observed what was happening above. He had his head raised, mouth open as he tasted and scented the water, trying to

determine what had been dropped into his enclosure to make all that racket. He was tasting Will's blood. When he swam up and closer, Will threw himself against the top of the cage and clawed at it; not to escape this time, but because he desperately didn't want them to pull the pin loose and open the cage.

Will spun, flashed his teeth in what he hoped was an intimidating manner, and felt his spines flare in anxiety as Mike circled closer, still investigating. Will hissed, not even realizing he'd made the sound, and snapped at the clawed hand that reached towards the mesh surrounding him. Mike paused, and instead of hissing back or baring his teeth, he let out that low, soft sound of greeting and flared slowly.

Only this time, with his new eyes, his new ears, and his new instincts, it wasn't just a familiar display. It had *meaning*. It wasn't spoken, not the way words were exchanged between people, but it resonated in Will's ears, making the cochlear nerve vibrate. Even the light looked different. It didn't just emit around Mike's body, it *radiated* out in streams, reflected off the water, the glass, and the cage. It reflected off of Will's own panicky, flickering light and soothed him, helping him slow it down. The meaning was clear, even if there were no words.

'I know you. I welcome you.'

Will hesitated, lips still drawn back in fear, and flicked his ears to listen. Mike made the soft sound again and Will tried to reply, but all that came out was a low, deep from the belly moan. Will didn't know how to speak to Mike, nor did he know how to speak to the people above with his newly shaped mouth and throat. He growled in frustration and Mike flared brighter, soothing him again.

'You're afraid. Don't be,' he seemed to say, though the meaning was much more than that. It was multifaceted, complex, and human language couldn't adequately describe it. It was meant to soothe, meant to calm, meant to invite connection, and affection. Above him, the line attached to the pin moved, and Will looked up. They were opening the cage. He jerked a little when the bottom of the cage dropped away, leaving him totally exposed from below. Will felt another sting of fear when Mike swooped down to investigate this new development. He seemed hesitant to enter the cage himself, and

Will got the distinct impression from his light and scent that Mike thought it was a trick in order to net him as well as Will.

After minutes passed with Mike doing nothing but curling and blinking below, Will let himself sink down and lower until he was free of the metal wires. When he was, Mike approached, cautious, as if he was afraid Will would bolt. To be honest, Will almost did, but where would he go? Even now Mike was huge, with almost a full foot and a half of length on him, and he had more experience swimming than Will could ever hope to. It must have been because Mike had been born like this, ‘harvested’ in the wild instead of ‘infected’ or ‘created’.

Through some miracle, Will managed to keep himself still, not just when the cage was withdrawn, but when Mike approached him. Will waited, swaying with the movement of the water as the larger undine circled him, brushing his fins, his tail, and his torso across Will’s body. When a hand landed on his ribs, right beneath his newly formed gills, Will twitched. A gentle whine made the twitch turn into a shudder.

Oh. Oh *that* felt good. It was as if the whine resonated somewhere deep in his body, touching him in places he didn’t know could be touched by sound alone.

‘*Breathe?*’ Mike asked with his hands, running a claw beneath Will’s gills.

And he could. He could breathe, he could swim, and he could sing. He could swim deep, roll in the sand at the bottom of the tank while Mike swam above, watching and telling him with absolute certainty in each flash of his lights, ‘I adore you. You are mine, I am yours. We are a bonded pair, and I’ll not be separated from you.’

They bedded together in the cave, with as much privacy as could be offered given the situation, curled around one another while their hands touched and their lights mingled. As the days stretched to weeks, Will found himself beginning to lose track of not only time, but himself as well. He couldn’t remember why he scratched lines in the coral or what he was trying to keep track of. He had difficulty concentrating and on remembering how he’d gotten here, and what

exactly had happened to him. All there was and all there had ever been was the tank, his mate, and the two legged things that came to feed them. Their language, which he used to understand, became jumbled in his mind. He tried to recall the meaning when they spoke, and sometimes, he almost thought he knew how to reply.

Sometimes he'd dream of two legged things with smiling faces and soft eyes that called him by a name he didn't remember, and he'd wake wailing for something he couldn't explain.

His mate would soothe him. He'd run his claws over Will's skin, through his spines, and across his lips. He'd press their heads together and shine so bright it was almost painful. The touch helped, and Will would forget the dreams of chemical stench, of skies so bright he couldn't see, and of a woman's voice, soft and sweet as she rocked him to sleep.

Mike was a good mate, dutiful and protective. He gnashed his teeth and attacked anyone who tried to tranquilize Will to pull him from the tank for their observations and samples. Will hated them, the two legged things in white coats. They clipped his fins and stole his blood before dumping him, disoriented, back into the tank. Mike would lick his wounds and soothe his hurts while he whistled and promised that someday they'd be free. Undine's didn't perish, not from old age at least. Mike trilled and cooed, kissed him gently and without end, and told Will to be brave, not to give into the endless boredom of it all and lose his mind. Someday they'd be without glass, with real currents to ride upon and real prey to hunt. Someday they'd have a real nest, one they made together, and they'd be free.

As time passed, the two legged things faces changed and the day the shrill blond one, Dr. Frazier Will remembered distantly, finally stopped coming, the tides of fortune changed. Because the new ones who came were kind; they spoke softly and never peeled the scales from Will's flesh or strapped him down to take samples. They played music and watched quietly while Will and Mike made laps around the tank, interwoven with each other. And one day, after close to an hour long struggle where Mike kept shredding the nets that were thrown into the water to ensnare them, Will was brought to the surface and loaded into a tank so small he thought he might go mad. Mike was near him, but separated by glass. Will couldn't touch his

mate.

Will called for him over and over, slammed himself against the glass with each rocking, sway of whatever they were being transported on made. When it finally stopped, the two leg with the glasses and shining eyes walked near their tanks, pressed his hand to them, and said something familiar, something that used to mean farewell.

Will didn't know what was happening or what he should do. He was dropped from the tank into a water so vast and so bright he was blind. He thrashed his tail, covered his eyes and shrieked. When Mike took his hand and dragged him down to where it was dark and quiet, Will followed. He followed the pulse of Mike's light, the sound of his call, and the gentle touch of Mike's fins on his scales.

He was scared at first. This new world was too vast, *too* endless. There were things that moved in the water: animals he'd never seen before. When Mike caught them they bled, and it was hot and slick instead of cold and congealed. Will ate his fill and hid as deep under the ridges of the trench as he could, near the volcanic vents where it was warm, while Mike circled the cave mouth and kept him safe. Mike sang to him and stroked his scales, hands lingering on his ribs and shoulders: on scars Will couldn't remember receiving.

His mate sang him songs of sadness, of times past, and a life Will couldn't recall. Mike sang to him about a man with a nest of brown hair, who was so small Mike could have snapped him up in a handful of bites. He sang about someone who didn't taunt or hurt, of someone who moved quietly in the dark and kept his head down. He sang about a two leg who passed the tank and didn't tap the glass or try to force Mike out of hiding just to watch him. He told Will stories about how the two leg sometimes had its own light that would shine from a device in its hand, and about how Mike would try to imitate the light in response. Mike crafted songs about someone who listened to music and danced above the water while he sang his own, complicated tunes. Mike sang of how he'd scared the man thing away the first time he'd tried to sing back, but how it had the courage to return night after night. Mike sang for so long and held him so close, Will felt almost as if it was a memory instead of a story.

Mike trilled and whistled about how the two legged thing that

danced above was sick, with some disease that made him smell strangely, and about how the scent grew stronger as the disease spread. He sang about how the thing suffered from an illness that made him nauseous and clumsy, and about how it didn't even seem to know it was sick. Mike sang about how he tried to save it by spitting his venom in its mouth and turning it undine, and about how it hadn't been enough. Mike trilled and crooned to him about how he tried to tell the two leg it was dying, tried to imitate with his body what he saw in the man's own decaying form. He flared his lights and painted Will a masterpiece about how the dancing creature had fallen into the tank, and how Mike had to bite the thing and empty his venom sacs before the captors took it away from him. He whistled and hummed about how if he didn't, the pretty, fragile two leg would die within the month. He could taste it in the man thing's blood.

Mike's stories brought him comfort, and slowly, Will started to slink from the safety of the cave, one painful inch at a time. His mate swam with him, belly up while Will rested against his chest. Sometimes, as if through a fog, Will remembered the feel of warm air on his skin, his legs dangling in the water as he rested against Mike and tried to stay afloat.

Notes for the Chapter:

Well, I hope you enjoyed the final instalment of this little modern fairy tale. I didn't mean for this to be so long, but I am glad I got to tell it the way I wanted, and I hope you found it satisfying. I really do enjoy doing these mermaid AUs and am glad I got it done before the end of May. If you enjoyed it, please let me know, and keep your eyes open for another one next MerMay.

As always, comments and kudos are appreciated. Be well and take care of yourselves.